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THE WORLD OF LAUREL & HARDY:  
A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the  
School of Theology at Claremont

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Religion

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by  
Spencer Wayne Sturm  
June 1974

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*This dissertation, written by*

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*under the direction of his Faculty Committee,  
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to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of  
Theology at Claremont in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of*

*DOCTOR OF RELIGION*

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## PREFACE

The primary sources in this paper are the films of Laurel & Hardy. This is both a joy and a frustration to me. It is a joy because the films are a continual delight. It is frustrating because so little has been written about the team or their films. For thirty years critics and scholars mostly ignored them. All the while, however, cultists paid tribute to and built their shrine to Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd. Books by the dozens have been written about them and even their autobiographies are available.

Such is not the case for Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. For not until the 1960's did any substantial materials appear about the team. Then the decade yielded only two works. One more book has recently been published (1973) by the *Sons of the Desert*, the international Laurel & Hardy organization. Unfortunately, however, it is a disappointment.

Thankfully the long-awaited works of the 1960's are both substantial, responsible endeavors; not to mention their thoroughly pleasurable qualities. The two books are *Mr. Laurel & Mr. Hardy*, by John McCabe and *The Films of Laurel and Hardy* by William K. Everson. These constitute the only major written sources on Laurel & Hardy!

I am deeply indebted to both Mr. McCabe and Mr. Everson for their loving and scholarly treatments of the team. John McCabe is a blessing to the world for his timely interviews and friendship with the team. On the basis of his personal knowledge of them and his

extensive correspondence with Lucille Hardy, Ollie's widow, I have relied greatly on his wonderful book. Perhaps this has been an indulgence, but a necessary one I think, under the circumstances.

I am very grateful to Mr. McCabe and Mr. Everson for the many insights they have shared with me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE . . . . .	iii
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
 Chapter	
I. THE APPEARANCE . . . . .	11
Physical Features . . . . .	11
Opposite Life Forces . . . . .	12
Stan . . . . .	13
Ollie . . . . .	15
Costume . . . . .	15
The Symbolism of Costume . . . . .	18
Interpretation . . . . .	25
"No One in Shabby Clothes is Treated Fairly" . . . . .	26
Power . . . . .	27
Sexuality . . . . .	27
Deception . . . . .	27
Nakedness . . . . .	29
The Meaning of Appearance . . . . .	30
II. THE GESTURES . . . . .	36
The Laurel & Hardy Mime . . . . .	36
Ollie . . . . .	39
The Tie Twiddle . . . . .	40
The Camera Look . . . . .	41
You-After-Me-Stanley . . . . .	43
The Signature . . . . .	44
The Hands . . . . .	45
The Walk . . . . .	46
The Double Take . . . . .	47
Stan . . . . .	48
The Double Take . . . . .	48
The Empty Stare . . . . .	48
The Head Scratch . . . . .	49
The Walk . . . . .	49
The Cry . . . . .	50
The Smile . . . . .	51
Interpretation . . . . .	53

Chapter	Page
III. THE CHARACTERS . . . . .	64
Ollie . . . . .	66
Embarrassment . . . . .	72
Patience . . . . .	73
Guilt . . . . .	73
The "Parent" . . . . .	75
Integrity . . . . .	76
Stan . . . . .	78
The Dimwit . . . . .	79
The Child . . . . .	86
His Innocence . . . . .	87
The Helper . . . . .	88
His Kindness . . . . .	89
Laurel & Hardy . . . . .	92
Children . . . . .	92
Babes in the Woods . . . . .	94
Fear . . . . .	94
Out of Control . . . . .	95
Incompetence . . . . .	96
Good Intentions . . . . .	96
Manners . . . . .	97
Revenge and Forgiveness . . . . .	98
People of Feeling . . . . .	99
Enduring Spirits . . . . .	100
Individuals . . . . .	101
Strangers . . . . .	102
They are Very Pleasant Fellows . . . . .	106
Friends . . . . .	107
Interpretation . . . . .	108
IV. THE WORLD OF LAUREL & HARDY . . . . .	121
"Here's Another Fine Mess, You've Gotten Me Into'" . . . . .	122
Violence . . . . .	124
Danger . . . . .	132
The Machine . . . . .	133
Frustration . . . . .	135
Domestic Disharmony . . . . .	136
Isolation . . . . .	138
Social Injustice . . . . .	140
The Law . . . . .	141
The World as Incomprehensible . . . . .	142
The World as Unsympathetic . . . . .	145
The World as Irrational . . . . .	146

Chapter	Page
The Presence of Grace in the World of Laurel & Hardy . . . . .	148
The Dance . . . . .	150
The Laugh . . . . .	151
The Laurel & Hardy Friendship . . . . .	152
Interpretation . . . . .	153
Here's Another Fine Mess You've Gotten Me Into! . . . .	153
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	164

## INTRODUCTION

The films of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy communicate the meaning of human existence. This is to assert that the characterization of "Stan and Ollie" express essential aspects of human life. Their situation points to our condition of living among our fellows in a world of cause and effect. The films are very effective, artistic, statements about mankind. Moreover they are statements about you and me. They reveal and celebrate life through laughter, and as such are "religious" in character.

The scope of this paper is intended to deal with Laurel & Hardy as a team. It is not a discussion of the films of Laurel & Hardy. Rather, its focus is upon the *characterization* of Stan and Ollie and the nature of their experience with their world. The films will be quoted and referred to again and again, but only as they illustrate a premise in question. Consequently, there will be absent many common subjects relative to the Laurel & Hardy films. Such topics as Stan Laurel's directing or editing influence, the camera facility of George Stevens, or the comic style at the Hal Roach studios will not be discussed.

A major presupposition regarding the films is simply that they are works of art. It is not prudent or even fruitful here to debate art definitions. It is sufficient to say that whatever responsible definition of aesthetics one desires, the films of Laurel & Hardy qualify. It is more important to this paper to understand what their



films do than how they do it and whether or not they do it artistically. It is enough to know that the films educate and expose in a beautiful and funny manner. One purpose of this paper is to clearly demonstrate this presupposition.

By far the most common reply to these assertions is skepticism and bewilderment. People find Laurel & Hardy to be such a bizarre place to look for theological clarity that a typical response is resounding laughter. When explaining the thesis most people ask, "What do Laurel & Hardy have to do with religion?" or "How can you possibly find meaning in their slapstick?" Historically the film critics have posed yet a more basic question. Until recently they have either inquired whether or not Laurel & Hardy are even funny, or worse they have simply ignored them altogether. The critics and scholars have been much more favorable to Keaton, Chaplin, and Lloyd. But for nearly half a century the public has proven the critics wrong.

The question regarding Laurel & Hardy's comic standing is irresponsible. But the inquiry as to what meaning their films can have is understandable because since 1927 people all over the world have been laughing at two fellows named Stan and Ollie, Dick and Dorf (Germany), Flip and Flap (Poland), and Crick and Crok (Italy). The world has laughed so much at their films for so long that it seems impossible for anyone to take them seriously at all. This problem arises due to the alleged separation of comedy and reality, humor and religion. It is erroneous, however, because comedy and laughter have their theological side and are very much akin to reality. In fact,

what is commonly understood as two distinct realities, comedy and tragedy, turn out to be inseparable. Their dramatic structures are different but their form is not mutually exclusive. And so to view Laurel & Hardy simply as two shuffling buffoons is a natural but inadequate response.

Then how is it that we are to take Laurel & Hardy seriously (theologically)? How is it possible to find meaning in their slapstick comedy? First, it must be clear that such an interpretation does not mean that we have to stop laughing. Indeed not, for Laurel & Hardy are first and above all else clowns par excellence. We go on laughing and continue to enjoy their beautiful comedy and funny situations. We still love them for their gift of comedy and thank them for our many hours of laughter and sheer delight.

And yet we may laugh *and* perceive their theological meanings precisely because laughter is not alien to theology or reason. Laughter contains reason and comedy, in fact, is only possible because of the presence of logic. We are only able to recognize humor because of our rational categorization of our experience. Our senses and our mind give necessary order to an otherwise chaotic collage of data. Without this rational or logical capacity it would be impossible to comprehend things that do not fit orderly into the scheme of things. Comedy exists when men perceive and acknowledge that something, someone is "out of order." When this inconsistency is not too painful, we laugh. All creatures require consistency for survival. Man even seems to need it for his happiness. And yet his life is riddled with

inconsistency. Laughter is one way he responds, and this response is grounded in reason. Without such a logical structure of comedy and humor, we simply would not be able to recognize the incongruities that befuddle our world.

Not only is logic a part of the inner composition of comedy, but also the Clown symbolizes a kind of logic all his own. The logic of the Clown penetrates the "normal" way of seeing the world. He perceives life "from the opposite side." And although his logic is often bizarre it sometimes is more "reasonable" than the logic of society. The "Wise Fool" has played a crucial role in drama and history. The "Village Idiot" often perceives reality when more "acceptable" citizens continue ignorantly in their own pursuits. Indeed, the Fool has his own wisdom. Significantly, his is the wisdom of the heart. It is centered in human feeling. Pascal's famous dictum perhaps expresses this best: "The heart has reasons that reason knows not."

Logic and gravity are not inherently more desirable virtues than humor and hilarity. This may seem blasphemous in a technocracy, but the apparent dichotomy believed to exist between reason and feeling all too often sides with reason in a culture of scientific idolatry. The Clown, however, is a creature in whom feeling rules. His life follows a logical path until he sets reason aside, pursuing the road of passion. This course can lead him either to destruction or salvation. Fools do indeed, "rush in where wise men fear to tread." Human feeling can often be the impetus for an "unreasonable" action. This

seems to describe the lives of Stan and Ollie. They are men of feeling and passion, and in their case, such is their ultimate salvation.

Comedy seeks often to show the absurdity of the "reasonable." In the comic format it is the "villain" who is clever, crafty, scheming, and witty. The comic "hero," in contrast, is customarily naïve, foolish, or just plain ignorant, but often forthright and usually of good intentions.

Secondly, we can take Laurel & Hardy theologically because they are real. Hardy has said that above everything else he and Stan "always tried to be real." He is quoted as having said that he derived the character of Ollie from real life, watching guests come and go through the lobby of his parents' hotel. We can take Laurel & Hardy seriously because they are so close to our world. Their characterization is a mere exaggeration of humanity, for in their films Stan and Ollie are just two human beings trying to survive together.

We can accept Laurel & Hardy as being real because they are so believable. Their costumes are believable. Their personalities are uncomfortably akin to our own. The Laurel & Hardy format is also uncommonly real, following a single idea taken from real life. For the most part their format is composed of Stan and Ollie being confronted by a simple-minded protagonist or a simple object that leads to trouble. Also part of the Laurel & Hardy format is the two fellows being engaged in an exasperatingly simple, everyday task that goes from bad to worse.

There are two reasons why Stan and Ollie are such believable characters. First, is the extreme care on their part to sustain

personality traits taken from reality. Secondly, is the fact their comic situations were often taken from real life. On many occasions gags and comedy scenes were developed from basic situations that had been observed by one of the film crew.

If one thinks that the Laurel & Hardy films are too far-fetched or too much removed from the real world, one is sorely mistaken. All one needs to do to correct this misconception is to examine one's immediate world. Daily news items remind us relentlessly that there are plenty of Laurels and Hardys around us. The current shortages of consumer products bring out a human nature not too far removed from Stan and Ollie's. As such, they are comic "types." They represent many "types": the "working man"; the "business man"; the "policeman"; the soldier, the sailor; the "handyman"; the "husband"; the "convict"; et cetera. However, there is a more universal "type" that Laurel & Hardy portray: *Everyman*.

Clearly it is reasonable to consider Laurel & Hardy theologically. It is also evident that comedy and laughter contain meaning and logic. Granting these two presuppositions we are now ready to address a primary question: Why give our attention to Laurel & Hardy? Why not study more "notable" comedians instead? The answer to this question is fundamental to this discussion. If it is not understood, the following chapters will not make sense. The answer is simple. Laurel & Hardy, more than any other comic team or single comedian, communicate the problems and joys of living in *community*. They are a little *symbolic* society within a problematic environment. The Laurel

& Hardy "form" is *relational*. They are a microcosm of our world. They reveal everything that is present when two or more persons attempt to dwell *together*. Seeing Stan and Ollie live through their predicaments, we gain an understanding of our own predicament and what it means to be a human being.

Not only do the films of Laurel & Hardy illuminate the human condition, they also clarify Christian understandings of man and God. In other words, they provide us with "little pictures," or illustrations, or parables of the gospel. Among other things, the Jesus Event is to be interpreted as a central theological hope of *living together* as whole persons in God's presence. The entire stories of the life and death, the healings and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth tell about the shattering of the Abyss. The void of aloneness that man experiences as *separation*, from himself, his fellows, and God is confronted.

A major theological/biblical interpretation is that somehow through the Jesus Event, God redeems or liberates man from this separation. This process is concerned with humanizing people. This is the great Christian hope and promise, namely that man shall become fully human by accepting his dependence and primary relatedness to God. This liberation is dependent upon, but not limited by, faith and response. It comes purely as grace. According to New Testament traditions, such grace is unpredictable, comes when least expected, and cannot be controlled or initiated by legalism. This liberation is also granted to *outcasts*. The most unacceptable, unrespectable of people are exactly those whose brokenness shall be encountered. Also according to New

Testament tradition, this liberation has *community* dimensions. We are responsible for one another's salvation, redemption. This humanizing process takes place only in a social context. This reality crashes into our consciousness in the words from Genesis: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

There are such theological interpretations that emerge from the films of Laurel & Hardy. Without "baptizing" the team with Christian dogmatics, it is evident that such biblical themes as violence, aloneness, pretention, salvation, blessing, and grace are all present in the problem of living for Stan and Ollie. These arise, however, non-discursively. They exist artistically, and do not operate in an "audio-visual," "educational" manner. Rather, the Laurel & Hardy films are *presentational*. That is to say, they convey, they introduce us to an interpretation of man without lecturing dogmatically. Consequently, the films bring into our presence a vision or a picture of life. They are humorous "parables" of symbolic meaning. They reveal perceptions and feelings about the human situation, and what is of ultimate value. The Laurel & Hardy films are interpretations.

Unlike the biblical epic (*e.g.*, "King of Kings") that merely seek to "imitate," the presentational film recreates reality. It lays life before us for our viewing, our interpretation, our enjoyment. The discursive or "audio-visual" film tries only to provide a literal translation. Artistic films, on the other hand, communicate by achieving some common understandings about the nature of life. Art celebrates life symbolically. It presents a vision of life in such a

way that the viewer is invited to *participate* in the vision of the artist(s). This aspect of participation separates the artistic film from the uncreative one. It is to be noted that the artistic film does not present reality itself, however. It presents *virtual* reality; or it offers an image of life for the viewing. A mirrored reflection is a "virtual reality." The image in the mirror is not reality, but it is a reflection of reality. In Langarian syntax, art communicates not feelings, but the *forms* of *feeling*. As such the films of Laurel & Hardy do not present reality *per se*. Rather, they offer a mirrored image of man for the seeing.

Artistic film makes visible the inner world of man's experience. Through art, man creates an image of himself and his world. He provides a basic mental and emotional picture by means of creating communicative symbols. In the creation of such symbols, he shows how he thinks of himself. Moreover, he gives order and design to his experience through such expressions. Art *reveals* and *explores* the forms of human feeling. It does not explicate.

These presuppositions are important to the thesis because they open up and free the relationship between film and religion. It calls into question the traditional, discursive "religious" film. It issues an opinion regarding the types of film needed to convey religious or spiritual ideas and values. It is notable that the two most recent explicitly religious films, "Godspell" and "Jesus Christ Superstar" employ comedy. "Godspell," in fact, uses slapstick, vaudeville, mime, and dance to communicate its religious interpretation. Unfortunately,



this fact is responsible partially for their rejection by orthodox Christendom. However, it remains that both films were well received by the general public and have revolutionized the religious film by giving it life, freshness, and theological value.

Religion and comedy are very similar both in terms of function and subject. The subject for both, of course, is life itself. The function of both is to humanize society, expose cultural inhumaneness, to ridicule man's incongruities, and to explore and reveal life meanings. Comedy and religion express human feelings. Both are an immediate sense of the motions and rhythms of living. This sense of life constitutes the underlying feeling of religion and the essence of comedy. It is the elemental celebration of life. Consider the festive and humorous nature of man's fundamental gatherings: family "get-togethers," tribal festivals, parties, and clan rituals. Such experiences are both comic in character and deeply religious. All of these are marked by happiness and revelry. Coming together to accept one another and one's common lot is a joyous occasion.

And so it is most appropriate that we turn our attention to the team of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. They are an image of family life. As we share their experience with them it is much like a "coming together" to celebrate life, in all of its humanness. There are moments of lunacy, anger, insane aggression, and mistrust. But also there is a love and fellowship portrayed that is strangely enduring. Dare we say *spiritual*?

## CHAPTER I

### THE APPEARANCE

#### PHYSICAL FEATURES

Just to look at Laurel & Hardy makes people roar with laughter or at least chuckle a little under their breath. Steve Allen is quoted by John McCabe as saying:

As to why they were funny . . . first of all, Laurel & Hardy *looked* funny. Certain comedians have this tremendous beginning advantage, in that audiences are amused before a word is spoken . . . So Laurel & Hardy were funny to look at--the dopey guy and the fat man, and both of them in ill-fitting, somewhat Chaplinesque clothes.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, Groucho Marx is of a similar opinion when asked what makes Laurel & Hardy funny: "I find them funny, among other reasons, because Stan Laurel had a skinny neck and Oliver Hardy a fat stomach." In a review of *Way Out West*, in the *New York Times*, May 4, 1937, Frank Nugent wrote:

Too many books are being written on the anatomy of humor and none of the humor of anatomy . . . we should mention that they (Laurel & Hardy) would not be funny if both were fat or both skinny; or if the cherubic Mr. Hardy could not arrange his dimples into a perfect pattern of pained resignation; or if the long-jawed Mr. Laurel was not, by the very cut of his jib, the model of a complete dolt. Nature meant them to be anatomically funny men, and there's nothing much one can do about nature, not even a script writer.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John McCabe, *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 135.

The appearance of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy is funny indeed. Ollie is the big one; Stan, the little guy. One is fat and one is skinny. They simply *look* funny, *together*. Their physical form follows a classical comic appearance. There are wood-cuts, for example, from the Middle Ages showing comic teams of the Laurel & Hardy variety. These two together look incongruent, and yet they fit together like glove fits hand. They seem to belong to each other like bread and wine.

### Opposite Life Forces

The appearance of Laurel & Hardy symbolizes life itself. Like life, their bodies and actions represent opposite life forces, the duality of nature. They are tension in motion. One is customarily passive; one is aggressive. One is big; the other is little. Clearly Ollie could crush Stan at any time, in terms of pure physical power. They appear as a dialectic, for they are the semblance of contrasting energy, contradictory forms in juxtaposition. But as in any dialectic, together they constitute truth. Apart, either is incomplete, half real.

In John McCabe's book, *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy*, the author recounts a conversation between an English businessman and Stan Laurel some years ago. The Englishman told Mr. Laurel that he had seen in an obscure village in China's interior, placed prominently in the prayer room of a large house, a picture of Laurel & Hardy. They were worshipped, he said, by the villagers as a symbol of China: the fat, all-knowing, well-fed mandarin side-by-side with the humble, ever-

patient, underfed peasant who bears the burden of life with simple and happy placidity.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not this account is based entirely as it happened is not important, for the truth of the statement lies in its observation, not in its historicity. However, McCabe states, himself, that at the time of publication of his book in 1968, on a modern building in a large inland city of China, there is a picture of Laurel & Hardy painted three stories high.

Marcel Marceau spoke to John McCabe about the symbolic representation of life forces in the Laurel & Hardy image.

And there is such fun when you see the two of them matched in a fight--the tiny, thin Stan against the big Hardy who could smash him down in a second but never does. That is why we laugh at them and love them. They are so opposite . . . David and Goliath--and this is a law of the theater--the law of contrast. Laurel and Hardy knew this law and they lived it and acted it beautifully on the screen.<sup>4</sup>

### Stan

Stan is lean, lanky, and slow motioned. His appearance is fragile and almost miraculously he is never broken. His narrow face seems to bespeak an equally narrow brain wave that is as loosely jointed as his gangly legs. His walk is awkward and yet resembles the unique grace of a giraffe in motion. His whole milieu is gawky. Everything about him, his movements, his appearance, seems to be held together by a loosely strung thread that acts more like a rubber band.

The light of Stan Laurel is his magical face. It is a face of expressive qualities even in the midst of perhaps the most blank

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 138.

expression in history. It is angular and yet simple, with every part angled upward smilingly, or downward in his classic cry or determined resolve, or most often it is the simple picture of vacuity.

The other give-away feature of Stan Laurel is his hair. Atop the long narrow head is a "crop" of hair that suggests an equally ungroomed mind. There is no part, just a mass of hairs going in every direction, especially straight up. The Stan Laurel hairdo is a natural "fright-wig" that does reveal a somewhat fearful little man underneath his haystack hair. The hair matches his screen character. It is simply unkept, straightforward, and as spontaneous as Stan Laurel.

Hair is symbolic. It can symbolize many different things. For example, hair can symbolize cultural and ethnic identity, religious and/or moral purity, personal identity, protest, or as is true in antiquity, hair can be a symbol or source of strength. Hair plays a very important tribal role both in industrial and in "primitive" cultures. It has various connotations including sex, age, prestige, and acceptability. People are actually judged by their hair. It is even a discriminatory issue.

If Stan's hair is chaotic and represents a disorganized character, Ollie's is predictably opposite. Ollie's hair, however, like Stan's is symbolic. It is as well-groomed as Stan's hair is wild and unmanageable. It is neat, organized, and very ordered. Every hair is formed into a pattern, and highlighted by coiffeured little spit-curl bangs. The hair reflects Ollie's self-image of importance and dignity.

## Ollie

If Stan's face is thin, Ollie's must be round. If Stan's is angular and definite, Ollie's face has to be smooth. Ollie's is the proverbial "baby face." The features are chubby but very expressive. His rotund body and big frame suggests an equally rotund ego, and a correspondingly fat mind. Ollie is even more awkward than Stan. He invariably stumbles, falls, knocks things over, pulls things down just the moment after Stan has narrowly escaped a similarly clumsy encounter.

## COSTUME

The Laurel & Hardy costumes are also important to the very humorous appearance of the team. They are funny not because they are fantastic, but to the contrary, because they are so realistic. They look out-of-date to us, but during the period when Laurel & Hardy were making films the Stan and Ollie costumes were very believable. Unlike the circus clown tradition they took their clothes from the every-day world. Theirs was not an appearance of make-up (they used very little), bald-scalp piece, padding, "white-face," big nose, slap shoes, or any other "clown" costume. Rather, the costumes are funny not of themselves but because they so much reflect the Stan and Ollie characters. One could put the exact same clothing on two other people and have, perhaps, an amusing sight. But one certainly would not have the funny, funny scene of a Stan or Ollie roaming questionably over the earth.

The clothing is suggestive of Stan and Ollie's personalities

and lends to their total appearance. It is a clue that the men inside may be unique and at the same time terribly ordinary. To begin with, their clothing literally does not fit their bodies. Their trousers are baggy and the pantlegs are either too long or too short. Their coats are too tight. Ollie's tie is too short and is dwarfed by his grandiose size. Also, it usually hangs off to one side and is carelessly tied. Stan's bow tie simply does not match his baggy pants and ill-fitting coat. Likewise, their stiff collars seem most inappropriate in light of their otherwise sloppy, unkempt wardrobe. As if all of this is not enough to warrant a doubtful personage, it is notable that in addition to such badly fitting apparel the ill-fit is not even consistent. The jacket and trousers, for example, do not fit in the same manner. While one is not big enough, the other is too large. The top of the wardrobe does not match the bottom. However, it must be reiterated that as humorously incongruent as these costumes appear, they are not bizarre. They were consistent with their contemporary styles. Stiff collars, for example, were not ordinary to the working class but neither were they all that uncommon. The costumes are funny because of the men in them and because they are symbolic of the Laurel & Hardy characters.

The Laurel & Hardy trademark is the derby or bowler hat. Although very uncommon in America today, the derby was a most natural sight in years past. Laurel & Hardy naturally wore bowlers. They were part of the comic costume of the day, derived from the English Music Hall. Stan Laurel and Chaplin were both from the Music Hall.

They both grew up in England at the turn of the century. The bowler was an English mark of pride, tradition, refinement, and English aristocracy. Consequently, most of the contemporary comedians in both the American vaudeville and in the English Music Hall wore the derby as a spoof on everything the hat symbolized.

And so the Laurel & Hardy costumes were a part of the everyday world. They just emerged naturally out of their common experience. At no time did the team sit down and plan or put together a "funny" costume. The clothing simply was a part of their character and, as such, became funny. Excepting the bowlers and stiff collars, their clothing fitted the work-a-day world of the common laborer. Stan and Ollie looked like two "average" fellows that could be seen in towns and cities everywhere.

Appearance, however, is an implicating subject, and the connection between appearance and "inner truth" or substance is very complex. Consequently, the Laurel & Hardy costumes constitute more than a simple sight, a phenomenon. Rather, the costumes are *symbolic*. They are reflective of the men inside them. They do not define wholly the people wearing them, but the baggy pants, high neck collars, and derby hats do help reveal the character, the personality of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. If their clothes seem mildly out of touch with their world, it is in direct proportion to the degree that their personal experience is out of touch. Likewise, if their starched collars seem inconsistent with ill-fitting suits, it is only characteristic of their larger world.

The subject of the Laurel & Hardy costumes presuppose several



observations. To begin, Stan and Ollie do behave in such a manner that leads us to believe their clothes are important to their selfhood. Stan's attitude is predictably simplistic. All of his concern is focused on his hat. Ollie is more complex. Although he shares Stan's preoccupation with his derby, his concern for his appearance entails his entire wardrobe. An interesting anecdotal reference regarding Ollie's concern for his appearance occurs in correspondence between Mr. Hardy's widow and John McCabe. In a letter dated February 17, 1959, Lucille Hardy wrote:

His size made him very conscious of his appearance, and that in turn made him very conscious of his dress. He was always meticulous in appearance. . . (His clothes) had to be tailored to perfection and he always kept them spotlessly cleaned and pressed. He felt there was nothing worse than to see a fat man sloppy and careless in dress.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the Oliver Hardy caricature of the fastidious dresser had its basis in fact. It was an exaggeration of a true-life human trait. Its comic effect is greatly enhanced by the absurdity of Ollie's pretentious meticulousness.

While noting Stan and Ollie's wardrobe, it is clear that usually their entire wardrobe consists of the clothes they are wearing at any given moment. Consequently the welfare of those clothes is very important, as it is generally understood that there are no replacements. At least there does not seem to be an abundance.

#### THE SYMBOLISM OF COSTUME

The symbolic status of Stan's and Ollie's costume takes three

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.

primary expressions throughout all the Laurel & Hardy films: 1) the hat exchange routine; 2) Ollie's meticulous concern for his clothes; and 3) the destruction of clothing as personal assault, retaliation, and mischance.

1) The hat exchange routine consists of a recurring sight gag in which Stan and Ollie put on each other's hat by mistake. In most instances this occurs as many as four or five times in succession, while each time the wrong hat ends up on the wrong head and the discovery of which occurs after some confusion. This recurring mixup immediately becomes irritation and causes much inconvenience and conflict. Clearly it is undesirable for either of them to wear the other's hat. The reason for this is twofold. First, the most obvious reason is their size. Stan's hat sits like a miniature duplicate atop Ollie's too-big head. In contrast, Ollie's hat cascades generously over Stan's smaller head, ears, and eyes. Secondly, this wonderfully simple sight gag points to a deeper reason why neither can wear the other's hat: they are so similar (as are the hats themselves), and yet opposites.

This hat obsession is more than a mere sight gag. Whatever has been going on prior to the hat mixup comes to a screeching stop until the hats finally rest again on the correct head. Stan and Ollie's entire lives are interrupted by this hat confusion. As such, their hats are a primary symbol of identity, dignity and self-worth. This holds true not only for Stan and Ollie but for other people throughout their films. A wonderful example of this occurs in *Music Box*. It

happens as Professor Theodore Von Schwarzenhoffen (played by Billy Gilbert) encounters Stan and Ollie laboring a piano up an unreasonably long and narrow flight of steps. The Professor demands they give him berth so he can pass without stepping aside. A melee ensues and during the ruckus one of the boys knocks off the Professor's hat which is caught subsequently by a stiff breeze, sails down many flights of stairs and comes to rest in the street far below, only to be quickly flattened by a passing truck. In a single, simple act the Professor's dignity, degrees, and prestige went sailing through the air toward its justifiable undoing.

Throughout history man has had an affection for his hats. The hat has had tribal significance in nonscientific cultures and continues to carry a vestigial importance in modern societies as well. Hats tend to tell many things about the person wearing it. They signify occupation, social standing, ethnic status, et cetera. The war bonnet, for example, among American Indian tribes was not only a sign of tribal position and bravery, it was believed to possess magical or spiritual power. The hat has religious meanings as well as social and political ramifications. Examples of this can be seen today by considering the Jewish prayer cap, the Amish religious sect, the Catholic head covering inside the sanctuary, the Christian's Easter hat tradition, and many more.

Man's fondness for his hat can almost be understood only in terms of his relationship to the world about him. For Stan and Ollie, it seems their hats are a sign of completeness, peace, and security.

It is as if they are exposed, naked, or revealed without their own personal head covering. Perhaps they are vulnerable to some mysterious danger without their bowlers. There is almost a spiritual quality about Stan's and Ollie's derbies.

The hat exchange gag has a humorous twist in *Liberty*, as Stan and Ollie hurriedly put on the other's trousers while in the back seat of an automobile during a prison escape. Stan ends up wearing Ollie's pants, and vice versa. The entire "plot" consists of the two fellows trying to exchange the pants to their rightful owner, while being chased by a policeman. During every switching attempt something or someone catches them in the act and foils their efforts once again.

The common idea linking the two gags is the significance both Stan and Ollie places on wearing the right clothing. Somehow Stan can only be Stan when wearing his derby or his pants, and Ollie can only be Ollie by the same process. They may not have many possessions in this world, but they do own the clothes on their back and no one, not even their life companion, is going to separate them from their clothes. Nor is any task or perilous situation too dangerous or too important to be interrupted in order to get the right hat on the right head, or the rightful owner in his trousers. Not even a last-chance escape to freedom or risking their very lives atop a skyscraper can deter them from their rightful costume (*Liberty*).

2) Ollie's personality is soundly reflected in his attitude about his apparel. For example, in the film *Flying Elephants*, with his pudgy little fingers he will meticulously smooth out a single

wrinkle in a coat that is nothing but wrinkles. Or with equal fastidiousness, he will squeeze a single water droplet out of his otherwise sopping white glove. This is done with all the social grace of a prince at a coronation. A wonderful occurrence of this is from a scene in *Music Box*, as Stan and Ollie are standing in the middle of the Professor's fish pond into which they have fallen, piano and all. Ollie, sopping wet and knee deep in water, ceremoniously wrings out a tiny droplet. Of course, in the world of Laurel & Hardy there is not any reason to assume that the only foreign substance in Ollie's glove should be water. It is just as likely to be fresh cement, raw egg, pie filling, or any other unnerving liquid.

Another example of the importance Ollie places on his clothing comes as a simple recurring motion of flicking a foreign object from his suit with one deliberate jetison-like motion of his stout middle finger. Of course, his entire body may be covered with anything from pie to chicken feathers, but always there is the futile gesture of one symbolic flick as if to say that a tiny piece of lint is more than his character can bear. Ollie is preoccupied by his concern over his and Stan's appearance. This concern is summed up in the question of what people will think of him. Keeping up this pretentious aura is, to Ollie, his most important endeavor. Losing his appearance of self-worth is the worst thing that can happen to him. Of course, this is precisely what happens to Ollie time and time again just at the point when he is working so hard to keep up appearances.

3) Finally, the importance of clothing in the world of Laurel

& Hardy is seen in the fact that "judgment" comes via the destruction of one's clothing by man and machine. Fittingly, such damage almost always happens to Ollie's clothes. This is, of course, because Ollie is the one who takes such care in his appearance. Stan has little concern for his clothing, with the exception of his hat. The destruction of clothing customarily begins or finishes an aggressive human encounter. This is a recurring theme and provides many wonderful sight gags in the Laurel & Hardy films. For example, in *Brats* Stan and Ollie are playing pool. Stan's pool cue becomes innocently entangled in Ollie's coat pocket, and in their combined efforts to dislodge it the entire side of the coat is torn to shreds. Ollie's response is an appealing look at the camera followed quickly by a resounding blow to the top of Stan's head with the end of his pool cue. One way or another, Ollie is usually having at least one pocket neatly torn from his pants or coat (*Blockheads*, *Twice Two*).

Another common mishap happens to Ollie's tie. Usually it is ceremoniously snipped off near the knot by some enraged protagonist, and then handed to him as an added courtesy. Likewise, his coat is often neatly ripped into two equal parts from the bottom, straight up the back to the collar. Or, he may have his shirttail pulled out and cut off diagonally. This is often done by their chief adversary, the wonderful Jimmy Finlayson, and occurs during a contemptual exchange between the team and "Finn" in *Big Business*. Also, Ollie frequently has the seat of his pants dismembered from the remainder of his trousers. This usually happens as the audience hears the sound of

tearing fabric accompanied by a close-up of Ollie's startled face. Only then is the audience allowed to see the terrible results: a gaping hole exposing the fleeting dignity of a defeated man.

Other atrocities happen to Ollie's clothes. There is a beautiful bit of traditional slapstick in *Habeas Corpus*, in which Stan and Ollie are lost at night in a strange neighborhood. In an attempt to find direction Ollie tells Stan to climb a nearby street sign in order to read the sign at the top. Naturally, after a moment of watching Stan's fruitless climbing efforts Ollie pushes him aside and tells Stan that he'll do the climbing himself. After reaching halfway, Ollie enlists Stan's help who subsequently pushes and pushes on Ollie's generously proportioned bottom. It is when Stan removes his hands momentarily that the audience discovers two perfectly shaped white handprints, one artistically placed on each side of Ollie's buttocks. Finally reaching the top, Ollie discovers the contents of the sign atop the pole: "wet paint." With a look of stoic resignation he slides down the pole only to see the result of his brilliant idea. His dark suit is now adorned not only by the two white handprints but now by skunk-like white stripes on all four limbs and down the chest of his jacket. In the dark of night he walks away with a delightful skeletal effect.

Two other clothing misadventures come to mind. Each one taking place at opposite ends of Ollie's robust body. In the *Music Box* Ollie steps on a rather large nail protruding from a board thrown down by Stan. Bellowing with pain, he steps on the other end of the board with

his other foot and prys upward. Of course his foot is freed from the nail, but likewise it is also freed from the entire sole of his shoe. A close-up reveals the bottom of Ollie's foot peering out of a soleless shoe, the top of which is completely intact. Equally prominent is the little dark spot which can only be the telltale mark of a rather fateful nail.

At the opposite end of his wardrobe, Ollie has trouble with his hat. In *Tit for Tat* Stan and Ollie's business neighbor (played by Charlie Hall) is engaged in an eye-for-an-eye encounter with our favorite pair. During the mayhem Charlie Hall takes off Ollie's bowler and, turning on his electric meat slicer, neatly slices off the top of the hat, through which Ollie helplessly gazes as though he were looking out the porthole of a sinking ship. The topless derby perfectly frames Ollie's chubby expressive face. It is an ingenious sight gag. The sound effect of the machine ripping through the bowler with the efficiency of a buzzsaw slicing through a sausage is also a nice addition to the entire gag and demonstrates well the team's mastery of sound. The destruction of Ollie's derby constitutes a climactic personal assault on everything the hat represents: his dignity, his honor, his character.

#### INTERPRETATION

Clothing is always a very personal expression. It is part of a person's identity. The way a person dresses, to some extent, is a semblance of how he feels about himself, what he thinks of himself,



and what he deems as important. Likewise, personal dress is formative in other's response to an individual. Like hair, clothing becomes an expression of self. It can signify a person's values, his place in society, ethnic or cultural heritage. Clothing is especially significant in America: it is a big business. It is highly commercial, with fashion dictating life-styles and customs. Clothing or costume determines a person's "acceptability." It casts human beings into molds prescribed by economics.

"No One in Shabby Clothes is Treated Fairly"

The reality that persons are accepted or rejected on the basis of appearance only (including costume) is not new or unique to American society. There is an old-world proverb that implies this phenomenon to be a universal condition: *"In vili veste nemo tractatur honeste"* (No one in shabby clothes is treated fairly).

"No one in shabby clothes is treated fairly." Perhaps like all proverbs this one is overstated. It does entail, however, a stark reality. Man lives in suspicion and judgment of his fellows simply on the basis of appearance. This fact is part of the human predicament. One man holds another in judgment because of his appearance. Moreover, races and ethnic groups exert power over other groups because of appearance. A person's future and well-being is thus classified.

"No one in shabby clothes is treated fairly." Justice is preconditioned by the way a man looks and dresses. This constitutes man living according to the "law." "Righteousness" is measured by triviality, by

what is on the outside, rather than by standards of moral behavior or ethical action. People are treated simply as stereotyped objects rather than living subjects. In biblical language costume has become a cultic symbol of "clean" and "unclean." In traditional theological terms it means "salvation by works."

### Power

Clothing has also become a sign or symbol of power. The aristocracy exerts power over the poor through appearance. "High society" is characterized by fashionableness. Such class distinctability has far-reaching ramifications in terms of social comfort, self-worth, and class (economic) mobility and freedom. As such, clothing can be used for the purpose of intimidation, or it can have an intimidating effect even when not intended.

### Sexuality

Clothing has become a symbol of sexuality. The person in more fashionable clothes is automatically considered to be more "appealing," more "desirable," more sexual. Women and men attempt sexual extortion by means of costume. Women are coerced into all sorts of apparel in order to be competitive on the sexual market. Advertising utilizes blatant sexism and obscenity in terms of clothing in order to sell something, anything.

### Deception

Clothing or costume can have the insidious effect of deception.

The "costume party" is a comic liturgy for hiding one's identity, for deceiving one's fellows. People do, in fact, hide beneath their clothing. The most obvious example of this in extremity is the Ku Klux Klan. But perhaps the more subtle expressions from everyday life are even more destructive and vicious than such radical demonstrations of hate and sedition as the KKK. Perhaps the common variety of personal fraud in which we all engage is the worst kind of deception: pretending to be something or someone we're not. Often we have hidden beneath the veneer of appearance for so long we have finally become hidden from ourselves. We hide beneath our fashionableness, our prestige, our acceptability, our appearance of divinity. This may be the ultimate idolatry.

So much of man's effort is trying to hide and deny his finiteness. Why else should he go about so frantically trying to enhance his appearance, his costume? Why is such self-elevation necessary, if not to reject one's own humanity? On the other hand, man's unreasonable attention to his appearance may be his fundamental insecurity. Perhaps all his vain effort of maintaining and enhancing his appearance comes from the need for him to assert his humanity, his self-worth, his personal value in the midst of a dehumanizing world. It seems that appearance, "keeping up with the Joneses" is important to perpetuate one's personal myth. This arises from the fact of man hiding from himself and his fellows for so long, he is engaged in a futile search for himself and his neighbor. His search, however, is external rather than introspective. In his self-denial he no longer accepts

his Creator-creature relationship. He wants to rule, to control, out of his self-dissatisfaction. He wants to be assertive, important. He wants power. He wants to be God.

Another possible reason man places so much stress on appearance is his drive, his demand, his final need for love. There is the thought that if one appears "correctly," one will fit in. If one "fits in," if one conforms, one will be accepted. Acceptance is equated with love. Man's eternal search is really for love, for affirmation. His need to be loved and to love is unquestionable.

Man seems to equate his dignity and security to the minute layer of fabric covering his frail body. Consequently, a favorite technique of comedy has been to shed man of his outer layer and expose his true condition. Nothing seems to reduce man to his meagerness quicker than public display of his not too impressive body. Neither is anything funnier than pomposity running down the street covered only by a pair of ill-fitting undergarments. Clothing is merciful, indeed, as it covers pudgy limbs, fat stomachs, spindly legs, and knobby knees.

### Nakedness

Theologically, in man's nakedness he is ultimately exposed. He cannot hide. He is in his natural condition. He is returned to his situation at birth. He is vulnerable. He is dependent. Moreover, his sexuality is made known. He is subject to the elements. He is fundamentally connected to his world. Nothing physically separates him from creation in the midst of his nakedness. As such, man is

most related and closer to his fellows when the pretension of fashion is dethroned.

Primal man and woman lost this natural condition of nakedness through disobedience to God. Their shame, embarrassment, and isolation is symbolized in their clothing. This is one meaning of the Adam and Eve narrative. When they refused and denied their limitation, when they wanted to become as God, they lost their primary relationship with each other and with their environment. Their nakedness was no longer a symbol of natural beauty and creaturely harmony. Rather, it became a source of discontent, shame, and division. By refusing his limitation, man lost sight of who he is. Clothing or costume became a symbolic removal from life "at the center." Man's natural existence, with God "at the center" of his experience, was denied by his own disobedience. Rather, man became separated from life. This separation has become a primary human condition. Symbolically, it is as if man dwells "in costume."

### The Meaning of Appearance

What is the nature of costume? What is the meaning of appearance? Is the appearance of something or someone related to "essence" or "substance"? What is the nature of the relationship between the two? Does appearance constitute "reality" entirely? Or does the old adage, "You can't judge a book by its cover," refer to truth? These questions penetrate our personal world because we are confronted daily with the imperative of sorting out the myriad of "appearances" that

present themselves and forming some kind of opinion about them. Likewise, the questions raise basic philosophical and religious issues.

Sight is perhaps the strongest of any of the human senses. Most judgments are based upon visual data and corresponding impressions. The mere visual act is preliminary to much knowledge. Through it a person edits much of his or her experience. In the visual act one sorts out, eliminates, and focuses upon centrally impressive stimuli. In other words, selective perception partially determines personal identity and action.

All of this might suggest the notion, "seeing is believing." In many ways this thought is correct. And yet it is quite problematic. "Seeing" has multiple meanings. The most obvious of these is a visual or optical process. However, "seeing" also infers perceiving. For example, when a blind person says, "I see," he is making a joke with a double meaning. Obviously he does not literally see, but he means instead that he does perceive. In other words, he understands. When the blind man says, "I see," he means that a given multiplicity has "come together" into a meaningful whole. This is the deeper meaning of "to see."

Perceiving and seeing are intricately related, but not mutually dependent. The visual process known as sight does not insure perception. One can surely "look" without seeing and one can see without understanding. The problem of the meaning of appearance is closely connected to these multiple connotations of sight.

According to Webster's Dictionary, *appear* can have the

following meanings; to come into view, to become visible; to be clear to the mind, obvious or evident; to reveal itself to an observer, be manifest; to come into public view; to come before an authoritative body; to come into existence.

*Appearance* is defined as: the act, action, or process of appearing, coming into view or being visible; the state or form in which one appears (aspect, look, mien); an outward state of appearing as opposed to an actual state, external show or pretense; semblance; a sense impression as distinguished from its true nature or real existence; the phenomenal as opposed to the real. Appearance usually suggests no more than the meaning common to the group, but can suggest a dissembling or pretense. Commonly an appearance is understood as a semblance; signifying an outward seeming, an approximation, without suggesting falseness or hypocrisy, but generally implying a difference between outward appearance and inner reality.

Consequently, appearance is not such a simple thing. Rather, it can reflect essence, reality, or it can obscure knowledge of these. The appearance is often our only basis for knowing, and yet it is only an approximation. Adding to such complexity is the whole problem regarding the relationship between the two.

Theologically, what are the implications of these issues? Appearance is a part of the basic structure of reality. Semblance is related to form in a complex manner. Man's experience of life comes as appearance. This fact has epistemological and religious implications. Man is cut off, so to speak, from reality (unless one equates

reality and phenomenon, appearance). His knowledge is subject to barriers and ultimately is defined by limitation. This applies to self-knowledge, knowledge of one's fellows, and finally knowledge of Being.

Man, as being cut off, is limited by and subject to the complexity of appearance. Existence at this level is superficial and can result in dreams, fantasies, illusions, and deceptions. By the very nature of his experience, man's knowledge is incomplete. As such his relatedness is somewhat secondary or removed from the center of life. His connection to Being is difficult because of the many barriers of appearance. This has psychological and social consequences. Such feelings as fear, suspicion, and guilt can arise from this disconnectedness.

Much of man's experience is superficial and erroneous simply because he thinks and moves on the surface of reality. His existence of apparency prohibits his relatedness in terms of his fellows, his environment, and God. Judgments are made on the basis of such apparency. People are often accepted or rejected solely because of external factors. Dress, facial features, and body structure all provide major cultural bases for the treatment of human beings. Also the appearance of wealth and social status are causal factors in the kind of treatment people receive. In America, culturally produced beauty and appeal, material possessions, and class have become normative for the way in which people are accepted.

Life based on such artificialities as style and fashion is clearly empty and meaningless. Moreover, it is inhumane and demoniac.



Social and sexual injustice and violence is perpetrated on the basis of appearance alone. This is more than unfortunate; it is sin. It is sinful because it is a denial of Being. Life grounded in appearances only is a refusal to acknowledge and accept ultimate meaning and spirituality. It is what makes the desecration of nature and people possible. For, if these realities are seen simply as physical phenomenon with no transcendence, then one's acts have no causal or deeper significance. Theologically, appearance is separation from God when man places appearance as a barrier between himself and Being.

This is not to say that the immediate (physical) world is any less real and meaningful. The immediate phenomena is the only world of man, and it is full of beauty and celebration. What is being said, is simply that man's experience of this world is incomplete and limited. He lives often in terms of a mistaken reality. The nature of such limitation is appearance. And yet appearance can point to truth and inner beauty. Often man's experience of the immediate world is simply inadequate and yet ironically this is his predicament. He must deal with this dichotomy and respond the best he can.

The problem of appearances affects Laurel & Hardy in two primary ways. First, is their reaction to the immediate world. Stan and Ollie are in this exact predicament. Their world seems to be one thing and constantly turns out to be something entirely different. The very hand that can befriend them turns out to poke them in the eye. Things are not as they appear to them. A sheet draped over a table, for example, and moving unknowingly by a rope attached to Stan's foot,

appears to be a sinister ghost of mischievous purpose. Or they might see Stan's shadow on a cemetery wall that appears to be some goblin or a killer lurking in the dark. Both of these apparent dangers in *Do Detectives Think?* have the same predictable result: panic and hysterical flight. The same kind of "dangers" are to be seen in *Habeas Corpus*. The Laurel & Hardy films are, in fact, full of situations and problems that arise simply because Stan and Ollie mistakenly interpret a given appearance as reality. They misjudge, misinterpret. They are fooled over and over again by the apparent meaning of things. Their knowledge and experience is limited. They are caught in the very human problem of the deception of appearances.

Secondly, Laurel & Hardy are affected by the problem of appearance in terms of the world's reaction to them. Stan and Ollie are constantly treated solely on the basis of appearance. They are shunned, laughed at, ridiculed, insulted, and subsequently ignored simply because of their demeanor.

## CHAPTER II

### THE GESTURES

#### THE LAUREL & HARDY MIME

Marcel Marceau defined mime as "the art of expressing feelings by attitudes and not a means of expressing words through gestures." Pantomime is not simply a discursive form minus words; it does not substitute gestures for words. Rather, the key to pantomime is the word *feeling*. Mime is the visualization of human feeling. As an art form it *re-presents* reality. It organizes human experience by making it manageable. It makes man's inner world of feeling visible and by seeing feeling forms man is better able to understand. One might say that mime is the perfection of attitude (gesture).

Laurel & Hardy were both wonderful mimes. Although they were among the few silent comedians to survive sound, and in fact were enhanced by it, they nonetheless remained silent comedians throughout the creative period of movie-making. The Laurel & Hardy films are visual experiences above all, and are simply underscored with sound. This fact was related in a glowing review that appeared in *The Film Exhibitor's Herald*, a national industry publication. In the review the writer exhorted managers to book *A Perfect Day*, the latest Laurel & Hardy film released in 1929 (the year the first sound motion picture was released). *A Perfect Day* was released in both silent and in sound versions and demonstrates why Laurel & Hardy "were able to make the

transition from silent to sound pictures without a ripple on the water." The review concluded with the following two sentences:

"Incidentally, pantomime is still their strongest weapon. They use dialogue as a kind of punctuation."<sup>1</sup>

Laurel & Hardy communicate through certain *gestures* that reveal their character. Gesture refers to the manner of carrying the body, the position or attitude of the body, the use of motions of the limbs or the body as a means of intentional expression. Gesture communicates idea, sentiment, or attitude. Susanne Langer suggests that gesture is *symbolic*, rather than mere sign language. Laurel & Hardy perfected certain symbolic mannerisms that have become trademarks. This is due, of course, to the artistic mastery with which they employed them for comic effect. Marceau, perhaps the greatest mime in the world writes:

All mimes in the world today owe much to Stan Laurel . . . He is of the mime that goes back through history to the very oldest days of the juggler and the comic troubadour. In those days they did not need much of a story. What they had principally was *lazzi*--or comic tricks. These perhaps look simple to people--like bumping into someone you don't see at first and then backing off in surprise and fear--but these things are not easy to do and do gracefully and do *funnily*. It takes much practice to do this in a very funny way. Now, there are many people who can do these things in a funny way but it is only a master like Stan or Charlie who can do these things in a very, very funny way to make us laugh out loud, heartily.<sup>2</sup>

John McCabe points out that the Laurel & Hardy gestures come out of the screen characters and are not superimposed. In drawing a distinction between Laurel & Hardy and other comedians of the silent

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<sup>1</sup>John McCabe, *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137.

screen McCabe has stated:

Had Laurel & Hardy been satisfied merely to think of themselves as gagsters, they could not have lasted. Where are the gagsters simon-pure of yesteryear? Comedians like Snub Pollard and Billy West were popular in their day . . . but that is all. If one looks at two or three of their films, one has seen all. The mannerisms are trotted out and are laughable, but they do not persist in the memory because they are on the surface, not revelations of comic character.<sup>3</sup>

The great difference between the Laurel & Hardy form and that of lesser clowns can be described in one word . . . *Character*. Their *lazzi* (comic tricks) are not simply stunts or gimmicks. They are really revelations about man himself. They are also integral to Stan Laurel and Oliver Norvelle Hardy. Again, John McCabe has succinctly caught the essence of the matter when he shares the following observation:

They came to the films knowing what was funny, and before the penetrating eye of the camera they were called on to create their own stories and their own characters. These characters had to have some kind of stability. Namely, endearing mannerisms. An audience does not really remember a performer and his humor with affection until it knows or thinks it knows the performer. All lasting humor has a basic ingredient of audience identification with the thing being done and the person doing it. The audience must learn to know, remember and, ultimately, to love the comedian's form.<sup>4</sup>

In discussing the mimic character of the Laurel & Hardy comedy, McCabe mentions that the art of mime is based on direct human observation. It is, he says, the art of "isolating the moments of human function that are beautiful or ludicrous and reproducing them to stir the beholder to rapture or laughter."<sup>5</sup> Stan Laurel learned from his early

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

days in vaudeville that, "a simple gesture, effectively and directly performed without tricks and closely following the pattern of nature is always funnier than clever words or funny songs."<sup>6</sup>

## OLLIE

Oliver Hardy was just such a comedian. Lucille Hardy was a script clerk for the Roach studios before she married Oliver Hardy. She wrote John McCabe about an occasion that happened during the filming of *The Flying Deuces*.<sup>7</sup> Her primary job was to keep everything in the film in continuity. After the shooting of a master scene the camera moved in for an individual shot of Babe (Oliver Hardy's nickname). Just before the shooting resumed she noticed that he was not holding his gloves and cane as he had done in the previous scene. Also his hat, which had been off in the master scene, was now on. Lucille proceeded to point this flaw out to him and distinctly remembered Babe's reply: "In a very gentlemanly way and with an almost courtly gesture, he stopped me by saying, 'I know how it was, my dear. Don't you worry. I'll take care of everything.'"

Lucille Hardy's reaction to Babe's rebuff was humiliation. She thought that anyone as pompous and conceited as that was bound to mess everything up when the cameras started shooting again. "But the minute the camera turned, I saw how wrong I was. He became the character he had been portraying. The dialogue, the mannerisms, every little gesture was flawless and matched the master scene perfectly.

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

This always amazed me over the years--his perfection with lines and gestures."

And so it is evident that the Laurel & Hardy gestures are perfect and integral to the characterization of Stan and Ollie. They are necessary for their completeness, their wholeness. They are more than superficial, mere physical movements. As such, gesture is more than appearance. It is a means of communication, conveyance. It is a revelation of inner truth. The Laurel & Hardy gestures or mannersisms are richly communicative and deeply theological, as well as being very, very funny. It is relevant, then, to take a closer look at these.

### The Tie Twiddle

Ollie is known by two primary gesticulative trademarks. One of these is the famous "tie-twiddle." Babe Hardy gave an interesting account of the birth of this mannerism in an interview with John McCabe. According to Babe's recollection the tie-twiddle was created during the filming of *Why Girls Love Sailors*. However this should more accurately be described as a "development" of it, since clues of the gesture appear in his earlier films. In one sequence in *Why Girls Love Sailors*, Ollie (playing "a rough sea captain") opens a door only to receive a full pail of water in the face. He told McCabe that it had the following effect:

I was expecting it, and yet in a way, I wasn't. I had a vague memory of it being part of the action coming up but as I recall I didn't expect it at that particular moment. It threw me mentally, just for a second or so, and I just couldn't think of what to do next. The camera was grinding away, and I knew I

had to do *something*, so I thought of blowing my nose with my wet and sopping tie. I was raising my tie to my nose when all of a sudden I realized that this would be a bit vulgar. There were some ladies watching us. So I waved the tie in a kind of tiddly-widdly fashion, in a kind of comic way, to show that I was embarrassed.<sup>8</sup>

By now, of course, the world knows that the tie-twiddle became inseparable with Oliver Hardy. It became a standard piece of his comic repertoire, taking many variations of the simple gesture. It occurs in practically every Laurel & Hardy film as Ollie confronted by a situation causing him discomfort or embarrassment, "while trying to look friendly at the same time."

### The Camera Look

The second major Hardy gesture seems to be just as natural to his character as the tie-twiddle. It is the well-known "camera look" or "camera stare." It is evidenced in his earliest films, even before the Laurel & Hardy team-up. However, like the tie-twiddle he ascribes its creation to *Why Girls Love Sailors*. He says:

It seems strange that so many good things for me could come out of the same film, but it's a fact that on that very set, in that very scene, just after I did the tie-twiddle, I had to become very exasperated. So I just stared right into the camera and registered disgust. The camera kept on going, and in that way my slow burn was born.<sup>9</sup>

The camera look is a very funny gesture when Oliver Hardy does it. It became a stock mannerism used even more frequently than his tie-twiddle. However, one fascinating aspect about the gesture is that it violates a fundamental unwritten rule of film comedy. That

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 84.



rule admonishes a comedian against looking straight into the camera lens. The reason for this is simply that it calls attention to the filming process and it calls attention also to the comedian himself. It is as if to say to the audience, "Look at me; see how funny I am." Normally this has a damaging effect because it disturbs camera transparency and interrupts the pace or rhythm of the action.

However, in the case of Oliver Hardy the admonition against looking into the camera has an opposite effect. It is a very funny gesture and seems very natural when he does it. Rather than constituting an intrusion it works in the opposite direction. The Hardy camera look is, in fact, an invitation to the viewer to join him in his comic and/or tragic development. By means of it Ollie solicits the audience's compassion, understanding, patience, and help. It is a look sometimes of honest pleading: please help me endure the burden of my friendship with Stan. On the other hand, sometimes it is the look of total exasperation. Most often it is directly resultant of an incredible bit of mischance or stupidity brought about by the team's struggle for survival. In some cases Ollie's camera look is almost a visual prayer. Usually it implies that Stan is to blame for Ollie's solicitous condition. However, the audience knows differently.

One interesting effect produced by the camera look is its quality of pacing. One of the rules of drama is rhythm, timing, or pacing. This is especially essential to comedy. The enduring quality of the Laurel & Hardy films is due, in part, to their slow, methodical timing. The slower pace is the great difference between the Hal Roach

and the Mack Sennett comedy styles. Likewise, it is one reason why so many of the Sennett comedians simply faded away as film audiences matured in taste. Today most of them have minor comic standing, if any. The accelerated Sennett pace, with all of its frenzy and frantic motion, simply stops being funny when it becomes tiresome. And it becomes tiresome rather soon. The greatest film comedians adopted the slower, more realistic and natural motion: Keaton, Chaplin, Fields, and Laurel & Hardy. One reason this style is more endearing is because it is more believable, hence closer to reality.

Ollie's camera look provided an excellent vehicle for establishing and maintaining an effective pace throughout most of the Laurel & Hardy films. This worked by "giving the audience time to assimilate every comic detail and savoring it." On the other hand, when a Laurel & Hardy film is below par the camera look only slows down an already dragging scene.

### You-After-Me-Stanley

Another of Ollie's gestures is the "you-after-me-Stanley" mannerism that he displays whenever leaving or entering a room or building. He must come before his companion, not when danger or some known retribution lies close at hand, but when prestige or position is considered, Ollie must be first. The full implication of this gesture is realized when one considers that it occurs only with Stan. Ollie's gentlemanly pretense would never allow such rude behavior to a stranger or acquaintance, especially should that person be a member of the

opposite sex. However, the "you-after-me" gesture is highly compatible with the nature of the Stan-Ollie relationship. As McCabe points out, according to Ollie's somewhat deficient logic, it only stands to reason that the biggest and strongest should be first. This gesture reveals a part of the Ollie character. Moreover, it is very similar to human nature at large, for Ollie's treatment of Stan as compared to his treatment of others mirrors the dissimilar behavior of people within the privacy of their immediate environment to their pretentious relationship to the world at large.

John McCabe provides an enlightening analysis of the "you-after-me-Stanley" gesture and what it means in the Laurel & Hardy relationship:

In Ollie's simple-minded view of the world, he must come first because he is the biggest; by nature, he feels, he must be the aggressive one. That his insistence on this arrangement invariably leads him into disaster is beside the point: he *must* come first. Stan accepts it quietly, and if Ollie cannot learn his lesson that taking the lead has its many dangers, Stan, too, cannot learn the corollary that he who takes the vanguard in the Laurel & Hardy world must inevitably bear the brunt of battle. But Stan never tires of trying to enter first.<sup>10</sup>

### The Signature

*Double Whoopee* contains another of the Oliver Hardy gestures that has become a minor but no less significant trademark. It is Ollie's flamboyant use of writing instruments, especially evident whenever he signs his name. This robust flair is highlighted by the contrast of Stan's signature: a simplistic, but assertive "X." Stan's

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

signature is as straightforward and unassuming as Ollie's is pretentious. Again, McCabe has offered an excellent observation from a scene in *Double Whoopee*:

In this film, the hotel manager, in the belief that this formidable person (Ollie) must surely be the eagerly awaited Grand Duke, conducts Ollie to the registration desk. Ollie removes his gloves ceremoniously, takes pen in hand and after three or four rococo curlicues in the air, signs his name with a flourish truly Napoleonic, pauses, lifts the pen lightly for a moment, and then thrusts the nib down sharply to make a period indelible through eternity.<sup>11</sup>

He continues, as the author provides a valid interpretation of this wonderfully enjoyable moment:

The gentle humor in all of this is something akin to that of the sight of an elephant wearing lace panties. It is ridiculous on the face of it but, possible, only on the face of it. Is the world's way the only way? Ollie's way is not our way but there is something in it that attracts us essentially. Wouldn't we--don't we--enjoy signing our name as he does but also do we not lose when we hold back from signing our names as fully as he does --with fervor, with panache, with joy?<sup>12</sup>

### The Hands

This gesture is closely associated with a larger aspect of Ollie's mannerisms, namely the pompous movements of his chubby but graceful hands. Nearly everything Ollie touches, he does so with light, delicate movements. This is largely incongruent with his bigness and rather clumsy feet. But whether cooking, cleaning, building, playing a musical instrument, or explaining something amidst embarrassment, Ollie's hands are graceful. Of course it is typical of the Laurel & Hardy world that such delicacy should court calamity. For

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 98f.

example, Stan invariably tries to ring the doorbell of a residence before he and Ollie enter. Ollie promptly shoves Stan aside or motions for him to step back as if to say, "I'll do it." With prince-like dignity and poetic motion a close-up records several precise circular swings of Ollie's extended forefinger followed by an assertive press on the doorbell or a deliberate pull of the bell cord. This graceful moment quite possibly precedes an equally ungraceful action, namely the doorbell mechanism flying off the wall, through a window, and more than likely landing in a neighboring fish pond or some other inappropriate spot. This occasion generally follows Stan's previously successful ringing of the very same doorbell just moments before Ollie's foul-up. Unlike Ollie's assertive effort, Stan experiences no ill-effect from his simple ringing of a doorbell, that is, of course, except for Ollie's characteristic reproach.

### The Walk

Also, Ollie's walk is a gesture of his character. It is a walk of determination and self-confidence, seeming to know its destination. It can be even defiant or cocky, but normally it is lighthearted and carefree. One is impressed by his agility and ability to execute falls and stumbles, and general clumsiness. When asked about his actual gracefulness by John McCabe, he replied:

I always try to walk lightly. I don't like to see heavy men lurching all over the place; there's no real need for it. I've always loved to dance and I suppose that's why I've learned how to walk easily.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

### The Double Take

There are two other gestures that are closely related. One is Ollie's superb "double take" and the other is the customary nod of his head which can register comprehension, disbelief, or "I-told-you-so" self-satisfaction. The double take is a standard bit of visual comedy. It is a delayed reaction of shock or surprise to some unusual or unexpected situation or statement. It works as the comedian first looks at something with unthinking acceptance and then with a quick jerk of the head he "re-looks" at the same phenomenon registering a startled and obvious understanding. Ollie adds a simultaneous blink and vertical head nod as part of his double take. He conveys visually what is going on in his mind. The fact of its delayed nature also reveals much about human experience as well as Ollie's particular character. A "booby," a slow thinker, a dim-witted fellow takes time for something to "sink in" his rather miniscule brain. Consequently, the double take is a natural expression of delayed comprehension.

The double take serves a technical function as well. It increases and focuses the audience's response to the comic action. It underscores what has taken place and adds to the humor by the fact that the audience has comprehended the situation before the clown has understood what is happening around him. This has the effect of the audience thinking that it is well ahead of those two dumb guys on the screen. (This is a part of the nature of comedy, often referred to as audience superiority.) And not only is the action funny, but by virtue of the good double take the humor is greatly increased by the

comedian's comic "re-action."

## STAN

### The Double Take

Like Ollie's, Stan's double take is a unique version of the standard technique. Instead of a delayed head reaction only, his double take involves his whole body. It loosely, and with generalized disorganization, jumps this way or that, out of control. His entire body is nearly up-ended in response to a grossly unnerving encounter. Often the world of Stan Laurel is so overpowering that his delayed understanding of it is so self-disruptive that he almost loses his already shaky equilibrium. During the personal earthquake of his comprehension, symbolized by the double take, he sometimes literally grabs onto something or someone more stable than he, just to keep his precarious balance. It is notable that most often his stabilizing support is Ollie, a bit of humorous irony considering that Ollie is no more stable than Stan.

### The Empty Stare

The opposite of Stan's double take is the "eye blink" and the "empty stare." While the double take is clearly traumatic response, the eye blink and empty gaze express total bewilderment. They convey that Stan is so confused that he is unable to react at all. Never has there been a more perfect countenance of complete mental vacuity. Stan Laurel's face symbolizes total empty-headedness and everything that is

opposite to understanding. It is so beautifully executed that one can almost imagine the sight and sound inside Stan's head of mental gears meshing, being driven by a single cylinder, running out of gas. Sometimes slowly, one beat behind the slowest thinker in captivity, there is a faint glimmer of an idea glowing somewhere in the gray haze that is Stan Laurel's mind. However, the eye blink seems to convey that behind those eyes, the glowing idea is a flickering light.

### The Head Scratch

Accompanying Stan's mental confusion or outright default there is a Laurel gesture mimicked the world over. It is his famous "head scratch." Confirming what we already suspect, namely that inside that lovable but blank expression lies a completely disorganized mind. Stan removes his derby and scratches upward with his four fingers and thumb a handful of hair resembling a windblown haystack. As McCabe calls it, it constitutes a natural "fright-wig," a comic device dating from antiquity. The hair, of course, is symbolic of Stan's chaotic thoughts.

### The Walk

Stan's walk is another Laurel gesture that conveys his character. Whereas Ollie walks with a definite self-confidence and determination, Stan's walk is more defined as a springy but aimless meander. It seems to be directionless except as "going along." For the most part his walk is a carefree saunter, a kind of contented voyage. It can reflect a determined will but even then it is a rather loosely



jointed, limber purpose. Such singlemindedness is clearly a passing phenomenon.

The two Stan Laurel gestures, however, that most clearly define him are opposites. And yet, like opposite life forces they dwell together. These two mannerisms are the Laurel "cry" and the Laurel "smile." They are the prevailing conditions of a simple soul. Though they are bed fellows, each lies at opposite ends of the life spectrum. And yet each one constitutes part of the Laurel dialectic. They seem to symbolize the complexity and simplicity of a human being: happiness and sadness. Symbolically the smile-cry gestures convey life itself: pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, indeed comedy and tragedy. Stan's straightforward and honest character is declared through these symbols.

### The Cry

The Laurel cry is his outburst of pain. The fact that it is so humorous is itself an indication that comedy and tragedy are inseparable. We laugh at Stan's agony because like so much of our despair it is temporary, unjustified, and therefore, ludicrous. Mostly it is the outcry of his frustration, guilt, and fear. It is a symbol of Stan's well-meaning intentions but ultimate helplessness. The Laurel cry is wonderfully expressive. His entire face becomes an emoting, humorous sight of feeling. Everything but his eyebrows turn downward. He tucks his chin in as far as it will retreat as if in an effort to protect it from further risk. The mouth forms a perfect upside-down smile with the corners joining an array of chin lines all scrunched

together in a downward pattern. And the eyes close into minute slits as though to close out further dangers and all with which Stan Laurel cannot cope.

### The Smile

The opposite of pain is happiness and the opposite of Stan's cry is his infectious smile. It can only be described as Stan Laurel. Starting with the natural hairdo at the top, down to the lines of his chin, everything symbolizes peace, contentment, joy, goodwill. The forehead is raised revealing generous horizontal creases that almost seem like miniature steps to the firmament of heaven. The eyebrows form perfect arches indicating his uplifted spirit. The eyes are narrowed and the corners of his curved mouth flow into cheeks that accentuate a unique yet classic smile. The entire smile is formed with the lips pressed together. The line of the lips forms a wonderful little upside-down arch stopping abruptly at perpendicular cheek lines. The chin resembles a modified inverted horseshoe curve, containing all the good fortune in the world. Artistically Stan's hairline, mouth, and chin form almost identical arcs. The three parts blend into a picture of happiness.

Webster's defines *smile* as "a facial expression showing pleasure, amusement, affection, friendliness, irony . . . and characterized by an upward curving of the corners of the mouth and a sparkling of the eyes." It seems as though this description was directed to Stan Laurel. His smile is simple and is formed at any slight encouragement.

For the most part the encouragement lies just beneath the smile itself, inside Stan. As such it is an effective conveyance of his basic character.

Stan, being a simple creature, does not need much to stimulate his proverbial smile. A rather heart-warming scene occurs in *Brats* that well illuminates the nature of his smile. The scene follows like this. Stan Laurel, Jr. (in *Brats* they portray their own children as well as themselves) inadvertently shoots Ollie, Jr. in the fanny with a gigantic pop-gun. During the effort to prescribe relief from the irritating wound in such a tender region, the boys knock over a bottle of horse liniment which pours into Ollie's pajamas. The result is no less than a wild burning sensation that sets him running frantically seeking some kind of abatement. Stan, Jr. has an idea for treatment. He sits Ollie, Jr. on the edge of the oversized bathtub to be cooled down by the fresh soothing waters.

Here begins the endearing scene of Stan Laurel's smile. Little Stan, Jr. splashes ample amounts of water onto Ollie, Jr.'s burning behind, accompanied by comforting patting motions. Then at properly paced intervals, Stan Jr. leans in front of Ollie, Jr. and offers his infectious smile consolingly, communicating compassion as well as the pleasure of knowing that he has rectified his original blunder. This is all done with alternating patting and smiling. He has finally *helped* his companion. But, it does not end here. Moments later Stan realizes that his sock is caught under one of the legs of the chair supporting Ollie's precarious perch on the edge of the tub. With one

swift jerk of Stan's leg in an effort to free his entangled sock, the chair tips and in goes Ollie, pajamas and all, cascading into the cold water filling the tub to flood proportions. The same water offering blessed relief and comfort just moments earlier now becomes a source of irritation and discomfort. And on goes the Stan and Ollie stalemate.

### INTERPRETATION

It is always a temptation to belabor a thesis in one's effort to communicate. This is a difficult temptation to resist. The following, I hope, does not constitute such a belabored approach. Neither is it to be considered allegory. More correctly this interpretation of the Laurel & Hardy gestures simply articulates my thinking as I reflect upon their theological meanings in terms of my Judaeo-Christian understandings of Laurel & Hardy and the world around me. These gestures, however, do become human symbols if one wishes to understand their beauty and humor. They are extraordinarily funny and yet superbly expressive of theological understandings.

1) The *tie-twiddle* says much about Ollie and about the human condition. It is a manifestation of *embarrassment*. Embarrassment is the same whether it is experienced by Ollie or by us. It is an uneasiness of a person in his world. To be embarrassed is to *feel* self-conscious, confused, and ill-at-ease. As such, embarrassment comes between people. It is a blockage, a barrier. It is the condition of disconcertment. It implies also impedance, hindrance,

or to cause difficulties. It implies the frustration of plans or expectations. It is also a loss of composure and personal organization, resulting in a feeling of humiliation.

Ollie's embarrassment symbolizes our embarrassment. It is not an experience unique to him. It is a *shared* situation; we understand the tie-twiddle because we are aware of the feelings it reflects. We *laugh* because it is a funny inconsistency among Ollie's other gestures of refinement and composure. We laugh also because the tie-twiddle is so often invoked in triviality. Ollie's embarrassment is a symptom of his human condition. He is easily embarrassed because of who he is. He is poor. He is uneasy about his body. He does not understand his world. And, he is pretentious. He wishes to present a false image to others and to himself. On the other hand, he is easily embarrassed because of the kind of world that is common to him and to us. Ollie is not really comfortable in his world. This is partially a justifiable conclusion on his part. The tie-twiddle, incidentally, is not his only gesture of embarrassment.

The very same reasons causing Ollie's embarrassment are active ingredients in our everyday world. We are caught in our devices, in our efforts to manipulate, in our inhumaneness with each other and with other animals. We are also pretentious, dishonest with ourselves and with others. Our gestures of embarrassment may be just as ludicrous as a tie-twiddle. Maybe they are more subtle, but nonetheless they are just as silly.

2) Likewise, the "you-after-me" gesture is not alien to our

personal existence. We know only too well. It is, like all gesture, symptomatic. It is a conveyance of something deep, something invisible made manifest. "You-after-me" is man's natural position. It reflects a need to assert, a need for "power." It is causally related to violence, injustice, and isolation. Ollie's attitude is no different than our freeway driving gestures and other reactions in public, wanting to be first at everything. It is the same as the bully who butts in line in front of others whether the bully happens to be 5 years old or 50. Yes, the human need to be first. To be "important" is the same human need. "Look at Me." "See Me." "Here am I." "I am going to be first." All of these feelings and drives take on gesture.

Such drives are both learned and innate, expressing the animal need for survival seen in the behavior of newborn infants, for example. It has to be *unlearned*. It does happen naturally. Man's selfish, self-centered existence must be exposed and broken. Therefore God breaks in, revealing, humanizing. The opposite of "you-after-me" comes as an image of a cross. The opposite is the elevation of others. Those who would be first shall be last. And the last shall be first.

3) The gestures of the "double take," the "nod," the "eye blink," Stan's "head scratch," and his "blank expression" all reveal a common experience of Laurel & Hardy. These gestures suggest something about them and about their world. Consequently, they are also symbolic of our world. All of these different mannerisms seem to imply several things about reality. Not the least of these is the impression that

reality can be shocking. When it comes crashing in upon us, sometimes it requires a "double take." Often its incredibleness is so startling that it simply jerks us around. It is so unbelievable at times we need a second look at what is happening just to assure ourselves that what we saw the first time was not an illusion. Life comes too fast for us. It is so complex and surprising. We can only be grabbed by it in such unnerving moments. The double take is a gesture of astonishment and confusion. It shakes us and upsets our balance just as though we were as unstable as Stan is when he is confronted by the harshness of his world and nearly bowled over as it finally becomes knowable.

Reality is, indeed, hard to take more often than not. Sometimes we don't accept it, rather we are simply struck by it like a meringue pie. Partially, the reason for the double take is that we are unprepared for life's developments. We sort of walk haphazardly through our world, seeming never to be ready for what befalls us. We are caught off guard by the fantastic capabilities of life to hinder or alter our own personal directions.

Of course the "double take" becomes necessary because man does not comprehend at his primary level of experience. He meanders aimlessly and is terribly unaware. He looks without seeing. He sees without perceiving. It is as if he is as naive and ignorant as are Stan and Ollie. Stan's gestures of incomprehension, the mobile eyebrows, the blink, the blank expression, his empty-headed hair scratch all suggest that he really does not understand. The world of Stan Laurel is largely inconceivable. Ollie understands more than Stan

but he too finds life rather staggering and generally bewildering.

Consequently, one of the difficulties of Laurel & Hardy is the problem of knowledge. They simply do not "know." Ollie does not know himself and Stan does not know much of anything. This question applies to technological knowledge but is not limited by that. Clearly Stan and Ollie do not know the world of technocracy. Instead, they are forced to do the best that they "know how" which never seems to be good enough in their highly complicated, industrialized world. But the question of Stan's and Ollie's ignorance penetrates the world of eccentric gadgets and instruments. Somehow we know that it goes deeper than this; it is more basic, more fundamental. It is not merely a matter of causality, nor a question of data quantity. No, the issue here is more personal, indeed, spiritual. Stan and Ollie's problem is one of *limitation*. Not only is their understanding *delayed* (the time lapse between the first and the second "take"), but what is more, when it finally comes it shakes their very world position. It is not simply a solution of needing more knowledge about "things" or having increased manipulative skills.

Stan and Ollie are a symbol of man's limitation. Ultimately man is incomplete, fragmented, broken, limited. He has a part in God but he himself is not God, even though he wants to be and pretends to be infinite. Man's problem of knowledge is qualitative as well as quantitative. It involves questions of aesthetics, philosophy, and theology. Fundamentally, his problem of knowledge is that he has lost sight of his relationship to his environment, and consequently to



Being as well. He is not sure of where he is. As such, man cannot know the beginning and the end because he lives somewhere in the middle. For him both past and future are beyond him because he cannot hurl himself in either direction nor can he control the time in which he moves and exists. This limitation in time is a primary source of man's knowledge. He cannot know Being, by means of all his striving, his controlling, his manipulation. And yet this is exactly the nature of his energies. Also man lives "on the surface." He finds it difficult to relate to meaning because superficialities become barriers.

Stan and Ollie--dare I say, "we"?--are limited. Technological and scientific knowledge does not seem to be our fundamental problem. In fact this corpus of knowledge is increasing at such an accelerated rate that human beings cannot keep pace or assimilate it all. And yet people are not any better equipped to cope with their world of pain, frustration, anxiety, insecurity, violence, boredom, et cetera. In fact, our fantastic technology has increased and complicated man's primary theological problems, *i.e.*, his relational dimension. Somehow we know that Ollie would still have a troublesome world even granting him increased skills and "know-how." Perhaps his difficulties arise more from misunderstanding, jealousy, deception, greed, impatience, and hostility than from his lack of scientific knowledge.

Accordingly, man's experience is not one of *shalom*, peace, fulfillment, wholeness, justice. He has lost his *feeling* for life. He has dissociated himself from his creator and from his fellow creatures. It is knowledge in this sense that is almost absent in

Laurel & Hardy's external world. Perceptual knowledge is lacking, the kind through which I *feel* myself connected to and finally responsible for the world about me.

4) The Oliver Hardy "camera look" also is a theological gesture. It is a very funny and significant moment of human sharing. Laurel & Hardy are wonderful not because they are geniuses but because they are so human and warm. Ollie's appeal into the camera lens has a touch of intimacy and personal warmth seldom equaled in film. He personally reaches out to the audience with facial gestures conveying full humanity. Such moments of humanness in the Laurel & Hardy films are what endear them to us. The gesture's artistic effectiveness is extraordinary, considering the usual "flop" created by looking directly into the camera by lesser comedians.

When Ollie looks into the camera it is a moment of honest sharing. It constitutes a person reaching out to others. He invites the audience's patience, understanding, and empathy. The worst moments in his life become the impetus for a visual, and wordless invitation to share his troubles. In these rare moments Ollie lays down all pretensions and "bears his soul" to the audience. Through them he may convey rage, impatience, or resignation, and a plea for help. But whatever the feeling, Ollie's emoting paves the way for a relationship with the viewer.

The fact that the camera look comes in the moment of disaster is significant. Ollie invites the audience into his predicament just when things seem impossible for him to bear alone. At the moment of

despair, when the task of life seems overwhelming, human beings become such by sharing one another's burdens. Crisis eliminates some of the barriers to becoming human. Through the camera look, Ollie's predicament becomes our predicament. Likewise, his dishonesty with himself is understood by us, for just as he holds Stan responsible for all his troubles, so we too project blame onto our closest companions for our own mixups. When he looks into the camera with his questioning eyes after some extraordinary comedy of errors which he blames on Stan, we can almost see his eyes exclaim, "How can anyone *be* so stupid?!" And yet we know intimately that just as we are usually the cause of our own misdoing, so Ollie has a hand in his perilous fortune.

As Ollie does his camera look it is like a visualization of Adam's self-deception and fraudulent attempt to blame Eve for his own disobedience. Both Ollie and Adam refuse to accept responsibility for their predicament. They attempt to pass it on and shirk their own actions and limitations. This actuality is hauntingly familiar, for we recognize it as a self-identification. Ollie's camera look is not unreal or bizarre. His look is our look and his feelings and deception are also our own. Likewise his silent appeal for help is a familiar experience and a personal description of our human condition.

5) Stan's cry is universal. It is the symbolic culmination of feeling arising from his helplessness in a world beyond his management. It is usually accompanied by his pathetically honest confession, "Well I can't help it!" which is more an accurate appraisal than a lame excuse. Stan is not really a "crybaby" for although crying is his

characteristic response when life presses in too hard, he is neither a constant complainer nor does he demand undue attention or notice, both of which are signs of the proverbial crybaby. Rather, Stan's cry is more an uncontrolled outburst, not a calculated device. It seems to take hold of him out of his being lost in a confusing world. It is prayerful in the sense that it implores help. As such, can it not be seen as a humorous "calling on the name of the Lord"? The Stan Laurel cry implies pleading, begging, imploring, beseeching understanding, mercy, compassion. He stands as a comic version of the beaten knight "crying" quarter. Stan is simply fearful, anxious, and regretful. He is a symbol of humanity, who is in urgent need of love. His cry is symbolic of the whimpering of a fretful and frightened child.

The Stan Laurel cry, however, is purely a symbolic travesty. For it is uncharacteristically devoid of tears. In this sense the Laurel cry is not a sob, or a wail, or moan, or lamentation. It is not the tragic cry of sorrow or unsuppressed grief. Rather, simply it conveys humorously man's finite capability to cope, to manage. All of his strivings are rather miniscule, relative to the cosmic dimensions of Being. The cry itself is even ineffectual in terms of a solution. Rather, it is purely confessional.

Do we not, then, see theological truth in Stan's comic cry? Is not man's limitation, need, and helplessness implied in his funny gesture, and is it not a cause for Grace? Is not Stan's cry as unpretentious as are Ollie's pompous gestures dishonest? Is not Stan's cry a comic vision of Job suffering, knowing not why and completely help-

less before God? Is he not a funny version of "the blind beggar" crying out: "Jesus, have mercy on me"?

6) There could never be a more perfect antithesis to the Laurel cry than the Laurel smile. It is the picture of *shalom*. The smile is a universal gesture of good will and peace. It is a symbol of blessing. Its meaning is well conveyed in the benediction: "May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord lift up his *countenance* upon you; may the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and give you peace."

The smile is understood and breaks through cultural barriers. It supercedes language. The smile is a revealing gesture that illuminates human meaning, releasing tension and displacing suspicion. It is indeed a blessing from one to another when it is an honest expression of acknowledgement and affection. And yet smiles are exactly what men find hardest to give. We have become so preoccupied with survival in place of life that a genuinely warm smile is far from commonplace. One finds in the midst of urban life not masses of smiling, happy people but rather frowning, intent, and angry paranoia. People do not relate in this setting; they are merely coexistants, getting in each other's way.

In our modern predicament humor among people seems to be more and more difficult. Men seem to be isolated from their fellows and fearful of their intentions. There is no peace, no understanding, no time or feeling of joy. Man in modern societies has become too complex with too many ulterior motives. His strivings have become consumed in acquisition. Humor has become artificially induced. Smiles seem to be

a masquerade, a means to some questionable end, instead of a celebrative gesture. Rather than the smile being a symbolic gesture of the harmony of nature, it has become a contrivance and something to market. In light of all of this, the simple, unassuming smile of Stan Laurel is a particularly nice blessing.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CHARACTERS

I have already suggested that Laurel & Hardy are meaningful because of their human warmth, their believability, their realness, their humanity, and the team's artistic conveyance of these. It has been said that many things have contributed to these, lending to their comic delight and prolonged popularity. Paramount among these is their wonderfully funny appearance and their humorous gestures, both of which reveal the Laurel & Hardy characters.

John McCabe has noted that the Laurel & Hardy characters did not appear all of a sudden. He says that "they were not created full blown."

The two comedians never sat down to have a good, long chat about their 'characters.' There was no full consciousness of the process of creation of the two supremely silly and ignorant men identified in the films as Stan and Ollie. And yet theirs was an act of creation, or perhaps more accurately, theirs was a procedure of creative evolution.<sup>1</sup>

This observation tends to strengthen rather than weaken the thesis that the films of Laurel & Hardy communicate theological meanings. A common critique to this view is that surely Laurel & Hardy did not intend their films to do anything but cause people to laugh. This may or may not be the case. The answer to this dilemma is irrelevant due to the fact that their films *do* illuminate humanity regardless of

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<sup>1</sup>John McCabe, *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy* (New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. 90f.

original intent. In fact, the point that the Laurel & Hardy characters arise out of the team's understandings about life and their common experiences, and not some preconceived notion, adds to their ultimate truth.

The characters evolved for the most part during the late 1920's and early 1930's as Stan and Ollie's screen identities emerged naturally. By 1927 they had become a shining feature of the Hal Roach "Comedy All Star" series which was a composite of the best silent film comedians under contract with the Roach studios. The two began to emerge as a team quite by nondesign when they appeared together (but not as a featured team) in *Slipping Wives* in 1926. By 1927 they had overshadowed the "All Star" series and Roach, recognizing the obvious, began their own comedy series. The wisdom of the change was noted in *The Film Exhibitor's Herald*:

The transfer of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy from the All Star Series to a series to be known as the Laurel and Hardy Series is a perfectly logical one inasmuch as they proved during the year that their personalities completely overshadow any descriptive title which otherwise might be given their comedies.<sup>2</sup>

McCabe highlights the significance of the words "their personalities," for in his words: "They were emerging from the cocoon of the laugh factory into the open air of recognition as individuals." This interpretation marks the departure of this chapter and is especially relevant to our purpose, for it is in Laurel & Hardy's characterization primarily that theological meanings emerge. The fact that they were superb clowns, great slapstick comedians, and implemented

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 92.



wonderful sight gags is, at this point, incidental. Their screen personalities are what convey essential understandings about humanity, albeit through their slapstick and situational comedy.

## OLLIE

Oliver Hardy refers to two possible influences on the emergence of Ollie's character. The first of these is a film that he made while at the Lubin studios in 1915, prior to signing with Roach. The film was entitled *The Paperhanger's Helper*, and although it was before the Laurel & Hardy team-up, Babe Hardy maintained that it contained the germinal basis of the Stan and Ollie format. He made the picture with a comedian named Bobby Ray, who posed the same kind of "opposite" to Ollie as the contrast presented by Stan Laurel. Ray was much shorter than Hardy and a lot smaller, just like Laurel. Hardy told John McCabe the kernel of the plot was very similar to the Laurel & Hardy structure.

We were paperhangers; I was the boss, Bobby was my helper. I was always giving him orders and he was always getting the short end of the stick . . . Bobby always played the fall guy; I was the wise guy just as I am in Laurel & Hardy, only in Laurel & Hardy, I always am the fall guy. I think of that picture . . . as being the start of the Laurel & Hardy idea as far as I was concerned.<sup>3</sup>

The second influence Babe Hardy attributes to Ollie's character was a cartoon character in a Georgia newspaper that he read as a boy. The name of the cartoon was "Helpful Henry." He shared his recollection of "Helpful Henry" with McCabe during one of their many interviews.

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

He was always trying to be helpful but he was always making a mess of things. He was very big and fussy and important but underneath it all, he was a very nice guy. That's much like the character I play.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps this is the basic character portrayal of Ollie. When asked by John McCabe whether he minded having his own name identified with that of a "big nitwit," Babe Hardy replied: " . . . no, I don't mind being identified with a nitwit. After all, he is a very nice person underneath . . . Stan and Ollie are real people and they are good people. So I don't feel bad that people connect me with a very dumb guy. In my opinion, he is also a very nice guy--and there are a lot of him around."<sup>5</sup>

This aspect of Ollie's character is mixed with his other personality traits that blend to make up the humorous "fat one" of the Laurel & Hardy team. Perhaps nothing more aptly describes the character of Ollie than the three words: *Oliver Norvell Hardy*. He was very proud of his ancestry, saying that the Hardy name constituted English stock who served Admiral Nelson and that his mother's name of Norvell was of Scottish descent. In commenting on the fact that Ollie on occasion uses his full name in some of the Laurel & Hardy films, John McCabe inquired if there was a particular reason for it. Hardy replied:

I use it in full sometimes when I want to sound very impressive. There's something about a three-barreled name that sounds impressive, and besides I think my name *does* sound impressive. I like the sound of it--and one thing I want to emphasize: I never use my name to make fun of it.<sup>6</sup>

Oliver Norvell Hardy's screen character can be summed up

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

rather well in a single word: *pretense*! The dictionary meaning of the word seems as if it were written to describe Ollie *per se*. Pretense denotes "a claim made or implied outwardly, but not supported by fact." It has to do with the act of offering something false; it is something alleged, professed rather than real. Most of Ollie's gestures communicate his pretentious nature. His walk which at times is more correctly described as an asserted strut, his hand gestures, facial mannerisms, and his manner of speech all hammer home the same image, namely that Oliver Norvell Hardy is a Very Important Person.

Ollie's pretense evades every corner of his personality. For example, his pretentious knowledge is conveyed in an endearingly funny moment from their feature, *Pardon Us*.<sup>7</sup> The plot is simple: Stan and Ollie have been sentenced to prison for making beer and then selling the maiden batch to a prohibition agent! While in prison Stan and Ollie attend the prison school. The teacher is none other than the self-elevated Jimmy Finlayson.

The prison school scene opens as Professor Finlayson enters the classroom flaunting complete academic costume of cap and gown. The room is shared by our friends Stan and Ollie plus an abundant supply of convict hooligans, roughnecks, and tuffs of various sorts. Finlayson inquires: "Now, then, what is a blizzard?" Stan pipes up: "A blizzard is the outside of a buzzard." Finlayson does one of his famous double takes in utter amazement. The teacher poses a second question:

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<sup>7</sup>The plot of *Pardon Us* herein described relies on John McCabe's account in *ibid*.

"Three goes into nine how many times?" Again Stan answers: "Three times." "Correct," responds Finlayson. Then Stan adds, "and two left over." At this Ollie breaks in laughing. Finlayson subsequently retorts, "What are *you* laughing at?" Ollie, displaying his superior knowledge, answers, "There's only one left over!" Finlayson then executes an even more drastic double take.

The great difference between Stan's and Ollie's ignorance is that Ollie often gives the illusion of rationality. Babe Hardy described this kind of ignorance: "I'm the dumbest kind of guy there is. I'm the dumb guy who thinks he's smart." He will chastise Stan by word or gesture for having said or done something incredibly foolish, and then a moment later he himself does something even more dumb.

Ollie also displays the pretense of competence. He thinks he can do everything better than Stan. Invariably, however, his arrogance causes him to suffer. His self-assertion nearly always leads to a pratfall. The typical sequence of events follows this pattern: Stan initiates some task or action; Ollie intrudes in order to do it better; Ollie bungles the job, or fortune seems to bungle it for him; Ollie suffers. His deception of competence can be heard many times, many places, as for example in *Blockheads* when he sounds off, "If you want something done right, do it yourself!"

In *Two Tars* Ollie "does it himself." Stan and Ollie are two fun-loving "gobs" on liberty going for an afternoon joyride in their Tin Lizzie. Stan is chauffeuring Ollie, the day seems blissful, the sun is shining. Stan, Ollie, and the Tin Lizzie are at peace.

Suddenly Stan has one or two near misses, nearly colliding with another car and running up on the sidewalk. Ollie is visibly unnerved by the close calls and demands Stan to pull over whereupon *he* assumes the driving duties. With ceremonial proficiency he begins to maneuver the little car back on course. With an air of this-is-the-way-you-do-it, he turns to Stan and, instructing him, says something about the first rule of the road is to watch where you are going. As if to punctuate lesson number one with an indelible exclamation point, lesson number two comes as Ollie, looking at his pupil, plows the car into a street lamp. As if the gods wish to add lesson number three, Ollie's camera look is interrupted as the globe falls from the street lamp and with perfect line crashes atop Ollie's foolish head.

Ollie is a picture of pretentious dignity. Dignity is the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed. It is a formal reserve of manner, characterized by gravity, poise. Dignity is usually conveyed through appearance, behavior, and language. Although Ollie's derby, stiff collar, and pompous gestures bespeak a personage of dignity, his claim is questionable at best, at least by society's standards. And in spite of the fact that much of what Oliver Norvell Hardy does is an ongoing quest for dignity, the world does not seem to support his claim or his quest.

Somehow when we think of Oliver Norvell Hardy our minds turn to thoughts of vanity. Vanity is more concerned about appearance, attainment, performance, possessions, or successes, than about personal worth. It denotes self-love and pride in exaggerated dosages. On

occasion Oliver Hardy conveys such personality traits. For example, in *Their First Mistake* not only has Ollie's wife left him, but what is more, he and Stan have an orphaned infant to look after. When Stan wants to back out of the arrangement because he has his "future," his "career" to think of, Ollie mutters, "What about me? What will my friends say? Why, I'll be *ostracized!*" Or again, in *That's My Wife*, when Ollie has suffered at the hands of his and Stan's misadventures, Mrs. Hardy has walked out and with her a large inheritance goes out the window. Moaning his misfortune to Laurel, he says: "I've lost my wife. I've lost my uncle's inheritance. I've been disgraced. What *more* can happen to me?" Of course we know that with a line like that Ollie's plight is about to take a swing for the worst. As if to answer his self-pitying question, a huge bowl of greasy soup flies at him with customary accuracy, landing on the defeated Mr. Hardy.

Vanity is a source of trouble not only for Oliver Hardy but for everyone with whom he comes into contact. *The Second Hundred Years* proves this maxim. Stan and Ollie are disguised as painters but in fact are attempting a prison break. Although dressed for the part and sporting paint pails and brushes, a suspicious policeman is not convinced. And so with policeman in pursuit Stan and Ollie proceed to prove they really are painters. They move hurriedly through town painting everything within reach. And then, as a fitting climax to this sequence, William Everson describes the closing scene:

. . . Laurel is busily painting a lamp post, and turns for a moment to dip his brush once more. Down the street comes a charming, long-legged, tight-skirted flapper. Briefly she

pauses by the lamp post to look into her pocket-mirror and preen herself before crossing the street. Her vanity is her undoing, for Laurel turns around to renew his assault on the lamp post, and promptly and energetically lays several layers of paint up and down, sideways and backwards, on the young lady's waiting derriere.<sup>8</sup>

### Embarrassment

Oliver Hardy's responses to life are predictably simple.

Normally they fall within several human categories: embarrassment, anger/violence, guilt, patience/impatience, or joy and happiness. It has already been noted that embarrassment is one of Ollie's fundamental responses to life in moments of discomfort and takes expression in the wonderfully communicative tie twiddle. But there is also another Ollie gesture that he sometimes uses to show his embarrassment. In perhaps the most understated reply ever recorded, Ollie embarrassingly explains after some momentous error or blunder, "Pardon us, we've made a slight *faux pas*."

By now, the Laurel & Hardy violence and anger is well-known. Most of it is perpetrated by Ollie's loss of patience, self-control, and subsequent physical reprisals. Oliver Hardy is a symbolic illustration of the Latin proverb, *Ira furor brevis est* (anger is brief madness). In some respects, however, Ollie is born of extraordinary patience, for most of the time he shows exceptional understanding or at least tolerance of the stupid antics of his companion. He is the fall guy to be sure, for whether he is to blame for some mischance

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<sup>8</sup>William K. Everson, *The Films of Laurel and Hardy* (New York: Citadel Press, 1967), p. 51.

or is Stan, Ollie always bears the brunt of consequences. In spite of this recurring suffering, Ollie demonstrates again and again his patience and endurance.

### Patience

One beautiful image of Ollie's restraint occurs in *Hog Wild*. The "plot" is simple. Ollie tries to erect a radio aerial on the roof of his house, with Stan's "help." The resulting efforts are disastrous. Some of Stan's help includes causing Ollie to careen into a fish pond from atop the house (this happens at least four times), be jerked down the chimney, to be nearly electrocuted as he touches the wrong wires to the battery, to be frightened out of his wits and nearly decapitated on a mad, hair-raising ride atop a ladder attached to Stan's car, and be nearly crushed by two street cars. In the midst of all this, Ollie, in a fit of near rage, picks up a board and meaning to finish Stan's future right then and there grabs control of his wild anger, and looking first at Stan's cowering figure and then at the board, sighs deeply and tosses it down. This is beautifully filmed as the two encounter one another precariously balanced on the apex of Ollie's roof. One is reminded by the scene of the "Fiddler on the Roof" who also tries to keep his balance, trying to scratch out a simple and pleasant tune without breaking his neck!

### Guilt

Another Hardy response to life's fortunes important to his



characterization is his gesture of *guilt*. His "baby face" is a natural conveyance of a childlike image of guilt. He tilts his head very far down, rests his double chin on his collar, raises his eyebrows thus creating numerous apologetic lines across his forehead, and with pitiful eyes conveys the most sheepish countenance in the world. And yet, such a face does not tell of deep remorse or penitence. It is truly a child's face revealing a child's guilt. As such, it is somewhat fleeting and superficial or if sincere, only temporarily active. It is also initiated by *authority*, whether a shrewish man-eating wife, or the local patrolman, or a pontifical judge. Authority, of course, may suggest that the Oliver Hardy and Stan Laurel guilt is externally derived, rather than from a deep inner sense of wrongdoing and repentance.

Although "the law" steps in to quiet and settle many Laurel & Hardy fracas and thus producing the Stan and Ollie "guilt," the classic form of the motif comes at the conclusion of *Big Business*. Like always, the plot of the film is thin. Stan and Ollie are trying to sell Christmas trees from door to door in the middle of summer. James Finlayson, one of the "prospects" doesn't want to buy. This is all the plot needed to start a skirmish of war proportions. The entire film consists of alternating demolition of Finlayson's house and Stan and Ollie's Tin Lizzie. About half-way through the battle a policeman happens on the scene and when he is inadvertently assaulted he finally steps in to bring the ruckus to a screeching halt.

The following scene consists of the policeman bringing the

belligerents together in a truce, be it ever so temporary. In the presence of the law the boys are visibly remorseful and are even moved to tears over the entire misunderstanding. Soon everyone is sobbing, Stan, Ollie, Finlayson, the policeman, and even the gallery of spectators who previously had been thoroughly enjoying the melee. Next, the policeman suggests shaking hands, letting bygones be bygones, and forgiving one another. As a gesture of repentance and good will, Ollie presents Finlayson with a cigar and Stan lights it, whereupon the two comrades' guilt takes a turn. With a stolen and somewhat sly glance at each other Stan and Ollie's face go through a metamorphous of a half-intended shame, to a half-expressed smile, to an outright chuckle of amusement. As Everson puts it, their remorse but a sham and together they are honest enough to confess having actually enjoyed the melee to the fullest. The policeman sees their mutual honesty and takes out after the now fleeing merry-men and devilish children, followed by a shot of Finlayson's "peace" cigar exploding in his face.

### The "Parent"

One of the basic roles in the conveyance of Ollie's character is his "parenting" of Stan. This aspect of Oliver Hardy is nicely symbolized in a scene from *Sons of the Desert*. The "Sons of the Desert" is a fraternal society of which the boys are proudly members. While attending an annual Sons of the Desert convention Stan and Ollie are part of the audience listening to the Exalted Ruler's yearly address. During the speech he exhorts the sacred responsibilities of the Order.

"The strong must help the weak," he says, as Ollie turns and "pointedly looks at Stanley in mute and rather proud acknowledgement of his own personal duty."

Ollie is clearly the "stronger" of the team. He is the parent and senses a "personal duty" to look out for his weaker associate. That is, to a point. In *Liberty* the two are dangerously tip-toeing on the girders atop a skyscraper under construction. Stan is literally immobilized by fear. Ollie shows courage and constantly looks out for his companion during their ordeal to find their way to safety. However, there is a limit to Ollie's bravery and to his philanthropy. At one point he is so concerned with Stan's safety he momentarily jeopardizes his own position. Suddenly he realizes his own danger and immediately pushes Stan back out over the edge in order to make himself secure.

Ollie is not the only parent of the two. In *They Go Boom*, for example, Stan consents to "sweat out" a severe head cold from which Ollie is suffering. The entire film is built around his well-meant but futile attempts to ease his partner's malady.

### Integrity

Underlying and undergirding Ollie's personality is his unvanquished sense of integrity, his *character*. Regardless of the facts, he senses Oliver Norvell Hardy to be a self-disciplined soul of strong moral fiber, firmness, with a high sense of ethics. He understands his character to be in an unimpaired or unmarred condition. Ostensibly

he conforms to an uncompromising code of moral behavior and unflinchingly adheres to it. Primarily Ollie's integrity and character can be crystalized in two words: his reputation.

Quite fitting to his character, Ollie's code of ethics and integrity focuses on his prevailing endeavor to uphold his reputation. A clear example of this occurs in *Tit for Tat* when Ollie is accused erroneously of having an affair with his neighbor's wife. The neighbor is not just any neighbor. He is Charlie Hall, a major Laurel & Hardy protagonist who has had stormy dealings with the team before. In *Tit for Tat* the Halls own the adjacent business next to Stan and Ollie's brand new electrical appliances store. The team is ready for the grand opening and a sign in the window signals to the world their high hopes and singular purpose: "Open for Big Business." Of course, the project is doomed from the start.

The source of the trouble in *Tit for Tat* is a running feud between Stan and Ollie and their new neighbor, Charlie Hall. It seems that the three have had turbulent dealings prior to this latest misadventure. The film follows a "tit for tat" exchange between them and slowly, methodically builds into typically Laurel & Hardy dimensions. The bout begins this time over a misunderstood relationship between Ollie and Mrs. Hall. This is all the provocation needed for Charlie Hall to renew the old grudge. And so the hostilities continue and build. Settling this debate becomes all-consuming. While the fury rages a shoplifter has found the Laurel & Hardy shop a haven for his larceny. Beginning modestly, he takes single items, then two at a

time, then he employs a wheelbarrow, and finally backs a van up to the door and cleans it of all merchandise.

At first the team is too preoccupied to bother with this obvious little thief. Finally Stan asks Ollie about the stranger's activity. Ollie replies indignantly, "Never mind him! There are more important things to consider! My character!"

Hence Ollie's reputation is his prevailing concern. It blocks out every other value and issue. After all, his good name has been slandered as he was erroneously accused of having a "clandestine" meeting with Mrs. Hall. Such crass accusations demand an immediate apology by Mr. Hall. The unmarred Hardy name has alas been scandalized. This Hardy sense of integrity, character is both his strength and his failing. It is his strength because actually Oliver Hardy is a very moral person in some respects: sexual morals, basically truthful, and never smutful. Generally he is the Southern Gentleman. However, this is not to say he is above breaking the law or responding to indignity with greater indignity. The point of contrast is the disparity between Oliver Hardy's concept of his integrity, his moral innocence, and the broader ethical implications of his interpersonal behavior and attitudes.

#### STAN

Stan Laurel was totally unique and shall never be replaced. He cannot happen again for never will there be another one just like him. Of course, this can be said of us all. And yet it has particular

significance in the case of this beloved and competent clown, for although his unique form is undisputed the character of Stan Laurel is also completely universal. He is a perfect personification of a comic type. He has lived for centuries and in that sense shall live as long as comedy is even a faint memory. John McCabe observed that "a clear parallel exists between the dim-witted zany of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Stan Laurel." He maintains that in one sense Stan Laurel was not an innovation but Shakespeare "come home."

### The Dimwit

Stan Laurel is one and yet many. He is the *Dimwit*. His mind is completely vacuous, not in the sense of being absolutely empty but by means of an operational level described only as slower than slow. Stanley is at least one step behind--everything that moves. One gets the impression that he can only arrive one way: *late*. That he arrives at all is perhaps a bigger mystery and surprise. William Everson gives a delightful account of Stan and Ollie's arrival at the fraternal convention of The Sons of the Desert in the picture by the same name:

The solemn meeting of the Sons of the Desert . . . serves as an admirable background for Laurel & Hardy's entrance. They are late, of course. They arrive shamefaced and embarrassed, miss each other at the door, stumble over assorted feet, and finally find empty seats, which they fill as hurriedly as possible, while the Exalted Ruler waits impatiently for the interruption to be over so that he can continue. Hardy smiles apologetically, and indicates that the speech should go on. But Laurel, shifting

his chair sideways to be nearer his friend, crunches Oliver's fingers between the two chairs, and a mighty howl further interrupts the proceedings.<sup>9</sup>

If Stan Laurel is slow there is only one thing slower: his mind. Not only is it slow; it is terribly singleminded, in the sense that neither hell nor high water can divert it from its programmed instructions. Normally this is a virtue. Not so, in the case of Stan Laurel or Oliver Hardy. For example, if Ollie, in an effort to persuade their reluctant Tin Lizzie to start, tells Stan to "throw out the clutch," that is precisely what he does--literally. He removes it from the floorboard and throws it out of the car.

Stan's literal-mindedness is exemplified beautifully in *Fra Diavolo*. Stan and Ollie are told to go to the wine cellar and draw a few flagons of an old vintage brew for their master, the Marquis de San Marco, alias Fra Diavolo ("The Devil's Brother"), an infamous bandit. McCabe describes the scene.

Ollie stands on a ladder leaning against the huge cask and draws the wine from a spout above. He passes a full flagon to Stan, takes an empty one from him and goes back to the spout as Stan pours the full flagon in a large pitcher. The pitcher is duly filled and Stan is desperate for another source of deposit. It does not occur to him to tell Ollie that the wine is ready. He has been directed to hand over and receive the flagons and that is what he will do. Obviously there is nothing for it but to pour the wine down his throat, and he accordingly bottoms-up a number of them as the sound track plays a drunken, wavering rendition of Auber's *Fra Diavolo* theme.<sup>10</sup>

The epitome of Stan's one-track brain that follows instructions

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152f.

<sup>10</sup> John McCabe, *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy* (New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1961), pp. 191f.

to the nth degree occurs in *Blockheads*. The scene is an Allied trench at the front during World War I. The troops are "going over the top," all except Pvt. Stan Laurel. He is instructed to remain behind and stand guard. Twenty years go by, the Armistice is a mere memory, and still Pvt. Laurel devotedly "sticks to his post." An unforgettable scene tells this story. As Stan marches to and fro at his post his pacing has hollowed out his own personal trench and as he continues his orders the camera slowly reveals a "mountain" of empty bean cans, clearly twenty years' worth!

Of course, Stan is not the only one with such a simple mind. His companion is no better. In *Pack up Your Troubles*, for instance, the fellows are in Army Camp during World War I. They have a running controversy with the camp cook. After collecting the camp's garbage they ask the cook what they should do with it. "What do you think you do with it? Take it to the General!" he replies sarcastically. Stan looks at Ollie, and asks: "What do you suppose the General wants with it?" Ollie moans, "There you go asking questions again. When will you learn to follow the Army curriculum? If the General wants it, he can have it!"<sup>11</sup> The General is none other than James Finlayson. The action lands the team in the Guard House.

And yet that Stan comprehends instructions is certainly not always the case. *Men O' War* provides a prime example of this. Stan and Ollie are sailors on liberty entertaining two "ladies" who are only

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<sup>11</sup> Leonard Maltin, *Movie Comedy Teams* (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 42.



out for a good time at the amusement park. To circumvent any extravagant expenditures, since they only have fifteen cents between them, Ollie has a perfect plan. He instructs Stan: There is only enough money to buy three sodas, so he'll give the girls their choice, he will order sarsaparilla for himself, and Stan is to refuse, saying "I don't want anything, thank you." And so, when time comes to put the plan into effect Ollie's instructions have done something besides made contact in Stan's unique thought factory. Repeatedly he asks Stan what he will have to drink and each time Stanley too places a tasty order. Obviously this time he has not "grasped the situation."

There are many intimations about Laurel & Hardy within their films that describe their mental dexterity. Two come from *The Hoosegow*. Stan and Ollie are newly arrived convicts and are introduced with the following: "Neither Mr. Laurel nor Mr. Hardy had any thoughts of doing wrong. As a matter of fact, they had no thoughts of any kind!" In the same film the two are members of a road gang. Having been told to chop wood for a fire, Stan cuts down a tree--and the lookout post housed in it. Both tree, lookout post, and guard come down, down, down. Such is the mental capacity of Stan Laurel. Again, this time from *Double Whoopee* Stan and Ollie's letter of introduction as the newly employed carriage starter and doorman at a swank hotel reads: "These boys were the best we could do on such short notice. There is some reason to believe that they may be competent." A subtitle in *Slipping Wives* describes Stan as being "out of the nowhere, going nowhere, delivering paint."

A scene from *Their First Mistake* further defines the somewhat shaky logic of the two clowns. They are keeping a baby that is the center of the plot. All night long has been an effort to get all three into bed at the same time, sleeping. Each time the baby finally goes to sleep they only succeed in waking her up. At one point, Stan turns out the lights, then goes back, strikes a match, and looks at the light switch. "Why did you do that?" Ollie asks. "Well, I wanted to see if the light switch was off," Stan responds. "Oh," says Ollie, comprehending at first, then registering a beautiful double take. Then perfectly illustrating that Ollie is even dumber than Stan but doesn't know it, he tells Stan, "Go get that lamp and bring it here. We can't have you striking matches all night!"<sup>12</sup>

In *Blockheads*, after twenty years of separation, Stan and Ollie are finally reunited whereupon Stan says, "You remember how dumb I used to be? Well, I'm better now." Ollie finds Stan in a veteran's hospital, sitting with one leg tucked under him in a wheelchair. Ollie assumes that Stan was wounded in the war and is now an amputee. He humors him and insists on carrying Stan to the car when it's time for Ollie to take him home. Stan says that he'll walk, but Ollie is insistent. When he discovers his mistake he asks Stan why he didn't tell him he had two legs. Stan replies, "Well, you didn't ask me!" Then muttering in confusion, he says, "I've always had them." Ollie angrily and sarcastically parrots Stan's claim, "You're better now!"

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

Somehow it has become clear that nothing much has changed, even after twenty years, not with Stan nor with Ollie.

An explicit description of Stan's vacuity appears in *Helpmates*. Ollie has enlisted Stan's help in cleaning his house after a "wild party" in the absence of his wife, but who soon is due to return. After Stan has absorbed just about all the commands and complaints shouted to him by Ollie, he gets mad and says, "Say, who do you think I am, Cinderella? You know, if I had any sense I'd leave." "Well," Ollie retorts, "it's a good thing you haven't." "It certainly is!" replies Stan, followed by an appropriately perplexing and puzzled expression. Sometimes Stan is so close to making sense, and yet so distant. In *Babes in Toyland* when Bo-Peep is forced to marry the villainous Barnaby of Bogeyland, Ollie tells, "Why, Stan is so upset he's not even going to the wedding--are you, Stan?" "Upset?" Stan replies, "Why I'm *housebroken*!"

A traditional Latin proverb reads, *Interdum stultus opportuna loquitur*: "Sometimes a fool says the right thing." But in Stan Laurel's case one needs to add to this statement the question, "But can he repeat it?" Stan's life is marked by fleeting cognizance. It is not unusual for him to display sound rationality, as the following example from *Their First Mistake* demonstrates. However,--and there is always a "however" in the lives of Laurel & Hardy--Stan's occasional astuteness generally lands the pair into indescribable torments.

*Their First Mistake* follows a simple plot. Stan wants Ollie

to sneak out with him and go to the "Cement Workers' Bazaar": "They're giving away a steam shovel," he explains. Ollie is first able to deceive Mrs. Hardy into saying yes, whereupon Stan accidentally slips the truth out to her. Suddenly the answer is "No!" followed by a torrent of kitchen utensils proficiently jettisoned at Ollie's conniving head. As the fellows settle back in temporary defeat Stan entertains an idea. "What you need in this house is a baby!" he tells Ollie. Ollie is fascinated by the thought and inquires about his unusual plan. Stan explains that a baby would be ample diversion to keep Mrs. Hardy occupied and happy so that she would not mind the two companions going out at night. Ollie, thinking there just might be something to it, says, "Tell me that again." Well, of course, Stan is unable to reorganize his brain waves from a mere moment before and, as he tries feebly to restate the original thought it reappears hopelessly nonsensical.

Another scene tells delightfully the Laurel wit. In *Helpmates* Stan and Ollie are talking on the telephone. Ollie demands, "Where have you been?" Stan replies, "Why, I've been here--with me." "And where were you last night?" inquires Ollie. "I couldn't come to the party," Stan explains, "because a dog bit me." "Bit you?" questions Ollie. "Yes," says Stan, "he bit me. B-i-t me. Bit me!" "Where?" demands Ollie. "Here!" says Stan, who carefully lowers the telephone to show Ollie the injured area.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>McCabe (New American), p. 171.

The Child

Stan Laurel, perhaps, is not so much an imbecilic fool as merely an incredibly naive child. This fact comes home again and again throughout the Laurel & Hardy films and is really a sustained part of Stan's character. His is a world of nonsense and childish delights. In *Be Big* (a revealing title itself) Stan and Ollie are leaving for a convention in Atlantic City. In one scene Stan's total preparations consist of packing his toy boat to take with him to the ocean. In *Fra Diavolo* Stan engages in two English hand games, explicitly the pasttime of children. One of these is described by McCabe as the "finger wiggle" in which, he says, both hands are clasped palms together, the middle fingers are interlocked, the hands rotated in opposite directions, and the two fingers wiggled back and forth rhythmically. The other game is called in the film "kneesie-earsie-nosie" in which the player slaps both knees, then pulls his nose with his left hand while simultaneously he pulls his left ear with his right hand. He again slaps his knees and reverses the pulls.<sup>14</sup>

One interesting ramification of the game gestures is that Stan does them very nonchalantly and with childish ease. Ollie, angered at first by such ridiculous pasttimes, ends up in a mad fit because try as he may he cannot do them. His anger is all the more in light of the "anything you can do, I can do better" attitude with which he approaches the silly games.

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p.128.

There is an endearing scene in *Pack up Your Troubles* which portrays Stan as a simple child. As a plan to lull a little girl to sleep who is in their keeping, Stan sits her on his lap and begins to tell her a story. Fatigued himself, he begins to get the story confused whereupon the little girl offers appropriate corrections. She knows the story quite well. As one can imagine the bedtime plan works in reverse. Soon Stan is sleeping like a baby while the intended napper is wide awake. Another image of Stan's childlike nature comes from *Their First Mistake* in which Stan and Ollie try to quiet the baby in their keeping by giving it her bottle. The three of them are in bed after a very hectic night of trying to get the baby to sleep. Ollie, half-asleep, accidentally puts the nipple into Stan's mouth instead. Stan, liking the warm nourishment very much, devours two whole bottles before Ollie becomes aware of his mistake.

### His Innocence

Stan Laurel, through his slowness and childlike nature, is described best, perhaps, as the "innocent one." Stan looks at his world through eyes of innocence. This innocence is not morally defined. The Laurel & Hardy films make it perfectly clear that Stan and Ollie are capable of cheating plus any number of mischievous deeds. Rather, Stan's innocence is such in terms of his naive, his lack of awareness or comprehension, his incompetence. It is echoed in his often repeated confession: *I couldn't help it*; or "I didn't know." In *Men O' War*, for example, Ollie is finally forced to order *one* soda

for both he and Stan to share. He gives it to Stan to drink his share first, who proceeds to drink the entire thing down to the very last delicious drop. With the exasperation of a parent Ollie inquires, "Now, *why* did you do that?" Stan cries and sputters an answer, "I couldn't help it. My half was on the bottom."

Sometimes Stan's cry of innocence is grounded in objective fact. In *Tit for Tat* Ollie sends Stan to the basement for a box of light bulbs. In the meantime a policeman has happened along and is watching Ollie's activities while standing on top of the sidewalk service elevator. From the basement Stan activates the elevator and arising seemingly out of the sidewalk itself, up comes Stan, light bulbs, and elevator. And up goes the policeman standing atop the rising elevator, who now is towering over everything below at street level. Ollie, clearly nervous in the presence of "the law" asks Stan, "Why don't you be more careful?" Stan replies, "I didn't know he was standing there." And, of course, from the basement Stan really didn't have any way of knowing of the policeman's presence. Ollie, on the other hand, was in a position to advert the mishap.

### The Helper

One of Stan Laurel's major roles follows a traditional theatrical theme. He is the *helper*. From the outset, however, we know better. Predictably, Stan's "help" turns out to be catastrophic and Ollie's invitation of it is nothing short of courting disaster. There are no less than twenty Laurel & Hardy films that contain the theme of

helping as an integral part of film acting. Among them *Hog Wild*, *Helpmates*, *Busy Bodies*, and *The Music Box* are major entries. *Hog Wild*'s helpful plot is revealed in a beautiful exchange between Stan and Ollie. Ollie is faced with the chore of putting up an antenna on the roof of his house. Stan drives by and, observing the activity, asks, "What are you doing?" Ollie tells him, followed by Stan's infamous question: "Mind if I help you?" Ollie looks at the camera knowing full well the implication of the request: "No, I don't mind--That is, if you'll help me!"

### His Kindness

Stan Laurel can be provoked into fits of devastating violence when his rights are transgressed too far. These fits are usually more accidentally defeating than designed. However, normally Stan is an image of kindness. He is innocent and inexperienced and customarily goes about like with his arms flung open ready to embrace the world. He is soft; he is kind. In *The Music Box*, for example, Stan and Ollie are delivering a piano transported by horse and wagon. The horse is the picture of tranquility and acts as if it must be half-asleep as it plods along in slow-motion fashion. Stan is the driver and is quite possibly the world's most nonaggressive wagoneer. In a wonderful gesture of good will a medium camera shot revealing horse, wagon, and our two delivery experts shows Stan applying buggy whip to the horse's backside with all the vehemence and violence of an artist placing the finishing stroke to a canvas of clouds. Stan's "lash" of the whip is



more like a pat of fond affection. It is by no means a highlight of *The Music Box* but it is illustrative of Stan's docility and kindness. Likewise it provides counterpoint to his violent outbursts that just sort of happen as the result of the continued provocation of antagonists.

In *A Chump at Oxford* Stan suffers total amnesia as the result of a blow on his head delivered by a falling window sash. The head injury causes Stan to lose what little personal identity to which he is accustomed and to undergo a complete personality reversal. During the memory loss he assumes the identity of the great Lord Paddington, an Oxfordian scholar and sportsman who mysteriously disappeared many years prior. As Lord Paddington he is terribly "British" exhibiting stereotyped traits of an English nobleman. Ollie is demoted to the position of Lord Paddington's personal valet, waiting on his lordship's every need and whim. The significance of Stan's amnesia is that as Lord Paddington he is impatient, violent, very aggressive, and condescending. He continually calls Ollie "Fatty Old Thing," a humiliation beyond Hardy's tolerance. The Laurel role is completely reversed, taking on many of Ollie's characteristics. For example, Stan Laurel could never call his companion by degrading names or be condescending in any manner. It simply is not part of his nature. He is too kind.

Stan's kindness is explicitly revealed in *Brats*. In the film Laurel & Hardy portray themselves and their own children. The "kids," Stan, Jr. and Ollie, Jr. are sent to bed by their babysitting fathers for misbehaving. After several admonitions to go to bed Ollie, Sr.'s

temper finally seizes him and he shouts a final command and threat to the two little "brats." At this point Stan Sr. advises Ollie: "Don't talk to them that way. Treat them with kindness! You'll get more out of them." Ollie responds by changing his tactics. He tries bribery. And it works--almost. He promises a bright new shiny nickel to the first one who gets his pajamas on and gets into bed.

Naturally the scheme does not work. Kindness does not include bribery. Neither can one nickel be given to two boys. Stan, Jr. cheats in order to get the nickel. Ollie is struggling with his Buster Brown necktie in such a hurry to undress that his pudgy little fingers will not cooperate. Suddenly Stan, Jr. emerges from the bathroom sporting nightie, before Ollie, Jr. is even able to undo his tie. Stan, proudly picks up the promised bounty and, putting it in the pocket of his nightshirt, turns to crawl up into bed revealing the nature of his quick-change artistry. Exposing his backside, Ollie's suspicions and bewilderment finds a sudden answer. As Stan crawls into bed he unknowingly reveals his street clothes underneath his nightshirt. In his rushed deception he has inadvertently tucked the tail of his nightshirt into his belt. Naturally a fight for justice ensues, resulting in Ollie, Jr. swallowing the nickel. During this, the grown-ups having left the room satisfied that the problem has been easily solved, have their own troubles. Satisfied in their ingenuity, they pause at the top of the stairs where Ollie spouts one of his timely platitudes: "A little kindness goes a long ways!" Stan promptly agrees, "It certainly does!" just as Ollie's ill-fated foot finds an

unhoused rollerskate that carries him down the stairs, pausing ever so briefly on each step with a resounding bounce.

## LAUREL & HARDY

### Children

*Brats* is perhaps the best revelation of the characters of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. John McCabe correctly points out that one of the reasons *Brats* is among the finest Laurel & Hardy films is the believability of the team as children. He says: "They are not adults acting as children; they *are* children. It is a clue to their screen personalities."<sup>15</sup>

Another clear glimpse of the childlike characters of Stan and Ollie occurs in *The Perfect Day*. The plot consists of The Laurels and The Hardys preparing to go on a Sunday picnic. The scene in question opens as the boys emerge from the kitchen touting a large platter of sandwiches which they have just crafted. Accidentally Stan spills the entire tray of delights all over Ollie. The irate Ollie retaliates by banging the tray soundly over Stan's head. The rest of the scene is ably described by McCabe:

One of the wives insists that they make up and the camera pans to the two of them, side-by-side, terribly indignant. For a long minute they go through a mutual transition from deep anger to petulance to poutiness to bashfulness to a faint smile to coy looks at each other concluding with a big smile and a handshake.<sup>16</sup>

William Everson, likewise, has shared a scene of Stan and Ollie

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 107.

as *the boys*. This time the scene occurs in *Their First Mistake*. As already mentioned, the plot of the film has the boys trying to get an evening out so that they can attend the Cement Workers' Bazaar. Mrs. Hardy is more than reluctant. She says "NO!" supported by a most convincing argument. Everson describes the scene:

Like two small boys who have been told they cannot go out to play, they retire to the bedroom, and in a beautifully conceived and executed sequence, literally retreat into childhood. They stretch out on the bed, and in frustration, boredom, and for the lack of anything else to do, shift positions, contort their limbs and try to change their 'prison' into a kind of game--but boredom is still the end result.<sup>17</sup>

That Stan and Ollie are children is certain indeed. Perhaps this is one reason they have so much difficulty in a grown-up world. That they are children in an "adult" world is not so clear. For, in their world "adults" act more like children than adults. Stan and Ollie are surrounded by children masquerading as mature people. Adulthood does not mean maturity, except legally. Constantly the boys are encountered and confronted by childlike people. Every once in a while, however, they do find a true adult figure. This occurs in *Pardon Us* as a rather pontifical warden offers them fatherly advice while presenting Stan and Ollie with their pardons after unknowingly foiling an escape attempt by fellow prisoners. "'Boys,' the warden begins, '--and you are my boys!' The boys warm up cozily. They are children in need not only of a loving but *understanding* father, willing to explain the world and its strange ways to them . . ."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Everson, p. 133.

<sup>18</sup>McCabe (New American), p. 123.

### Babes in the Woods

John McCabe points out that from *Pardon Us* we receive perhaps the most articulate description of Stan and Ollie. The warden in the film calls them, *babes in the woods*. This seems especially fitting, for the phrase implies their childlike nature and also suggests that their world may not be too unlike a dark and mysterious forest in which one could easily become lost. Stan and Ollie, in fact, do become lost--often. Perhaps they are in a constant condition of trying to find their way out of "the woods." They are young. They are unlearned, simple, unsophisticated, innocent. Many things can, and inevitably do, happen to "babes in the woods." There are dangers they do not understand.

### Fear

Stan and Ollie are *fearful*. Essentially because they do not understand, in all of their simplicity, life is a rather fearsome experience. Constantly, the boys are misinterpreting apparent dangers as personal evils. They are afraid of the unknown. This especially applies to metaphysical dimensions in terms of their belief in "spirits" of all varieties. Several Laurel & Hardy films provide the background for the appearance of spooks, and goblins, and ghosts, and in each case these apparitions result in much fright and hysterical activity. However, of more significance is the common dimension of fear in Stan and Ollie's everyday experience. There are many fears that they live with: fear of the unknown, fear of being alone, fear of physical pain,

fear of the "law," fear of consequences, fear of reprisal, et cetera.

Fear lives in Stan and Ollie partially because they are so ignorant and foolish and partially due to the nonrational nature of their characters. They are incapable of logical thought in terms of any customary definition. There is a Laurel & Hardy "logic" but within its dubious structure "A" is just as apt to lead to "Q" as is "Q" capable of leading to "A," or any other thing for that matter. Their logic works--sometimes. At others, it is virtually indestructible. For example, according to Stan's view of things, it is "logical" to pull an object to the middle of a room, stand on it, unscrew a bulb from a light fixture, and try to plug in an electrical appliance *there*, instead of using a nearby wall outlet, as he attempts in *The Music Box*. This is his sort of ill-logic. But what is sure to follow adheres indisputably to Laurel & Hardy logic. When Stan leans on the light fixture it will surely depart from its original hanging position, and come crashing down onto Ollie's unsuspecting head. Stan and Ollie's activities abound in such illogical logic. Part of the great joy of watching the Laurel & Hardy films is the fine balance between anticipation (logical) and surprise (illogical) development of the action.

### Out of Control

Stan and Ollie have their problems also because of their lack of *control*. Everything seems to be out of control for them, or it gets that way soon. At times they are not even in control of their bodies. The simplest task goes amiss, and from bad to worse. If

they are departing, chances are that the car will not start at all, and then finally when it does, it does so with such fervor that surely Ollie will be run down in the process.

### Incompetence

Mainly because Stan and Ollie are children in a world that does not understand, and is downright hostile to them, *and* because they do not understand the world, *and* because they are so dumb, *and* because they are so fearful, *and* because they are so irrational, *and* because they are such "babes in the woods"--they are *incompetent*. In such a condition they are not "well qualified" to do much of anything.

"Competency" connotes *performing* a task efficiently. By such standards Stan and Ollie are not competent. And in their world that disqualifies them. But still, "There is some reason to believe--be it ever so faint --that they may be competent" (*Double Whoopee*).

### Good Intentions

The question of Stan and Ollie's competence is well taken, but that their intentions are "average" and even "noble" at times is irrefutable. The boys generally do mean well. As Ollie usually adds to some task they are about to undertake, "Service with a Smile!" Often their goals are frivolous and seek only to imitate society, but they intend no evil, unless of course they have been soundly offended. Occasionally their goal is a noble one. Such is the case in *Pack up Your Troubles*, when the boys attempt to find an orphaned girl's only

living relative. They have three facts to go on: the name of the missing grandparents is "Smith"; they live in New York; and they are listed in the telephone directory. In *Come Clean* they stop an attempted suicide, and in *Laughing Gravy* they rescue an abandoned puppy from freezing.

### Manners

If their intentions are occasionally noble, they only correspond to the Laurel & Hardy gentlemanly natures, for theirs are the manners of English noblemen and Southern gentlemen--sometimes. They are particularly chivalrous. On the other hand they can be boorish if the occasion presents itself. For instance in *The Music Box* the boys are struggling a piano up a flight of stairs. A day-nurse is walking a baby stroller down the same stairs. Impasse. Ollie and Stan tip their derbies in respect wishing the mistress a good day. Ollie even leaves his post at the piano to help her get the carriage past the piano. When Ollie looks like he could use some assistance, Stan too leaves his post. The piano, now unattended, rolls back down the stairs to the street below. At this misfortune the day-nurse makes her way down the steps, her path now unobstructed, laughing and jeering all the way. She then says something to the effect that was the dumbest thing she had ever seen, whereupon Stan gives her a hefty kick right in the middle of her Southern.

For the most part, however, the team is conspicuously mannerly. Ollie is especially gentlemanly. His standard introduction when



addressing strangers is to remove his derby with the graciousness of a Duke and say, "Pardon this intrusion . . ." or "Pardon me . . ." At one point during the hair-raising chase scene in *Hog Wild*, while Ollie is frantically perched precariously atop a ladder attached to the car Stan is trying to keep from crashing, they pass a double decker street car. While passing, the two vehicles side-by-side, the ladder comes to rest against the second level railing behind which trolley passengers are seated. All of a sudden they look over and see an adjoining "passenger" riding wildly on a ladder at eye level with them. It is Ollie, of course, and what does he do in such an abnormal and perilous moment? He ceremoniously tips his hat!

Stan also has the ways of a gentleman. At the height of the insulting, aggressive exchange between the boys and "neighbor" Charlie Hall in *Tit for Tat*, Ollie retorts to the protagonist, after a rather devastating reprisal, "tit for tat!" Immediately Stan tips his derby to the antagonistic Mr. Hall. Ollie asks exasperatingly, "What did you do that for?" Stan replies, "I thought you said, tip me hat." While Stan's gentlemanly intentions may be pure, there certainly is not anything pure about his etiquette, unless it would be "pure-ly" ridiculous. In *The Second Hundred Years*, for instance, there is a dinner scene in which Stan does a hilarious bit of mime as he chases an "escaped" cherry from his fruit salad all around the table and the dinner guests at a lavish and aristocratic dinner party.

### Revenge and Forgiveness

The subject of "tit for tat" bring up a major part of Stan and

Ollie's characters, namely their forgiving but revengeful natures. As children they have a child's sense of justice. In *Going Bye Bye* Stan and Ollie are the key witnesses for the prosecution in a case against a psychopathic killer. When the judge announces the sentence of life imprisonment after the guilty verdict is delivered by the jury, Stan jumps to his feet and exclaims, "Aren't you going to hang him?" This, not the guilty verdict nor the sentence, nor their convicting testimony enrages the defendant who vows to escape and bring vengeance upon them. As can be expected, the killer does escape, and after much hilarity keeps his revengeful promise.

But Stan and Ollie can be very forgiving as well. *Tit for Tat* is a sequel to *Them Thar Hills* in which the boys become entangled innocently with Charlie Hall's wife. The jealous and belligerent Mr. Hall starts a violent brannegan which becomes the major action of *Them Thar Hills*. It is a typically wild Laurel & Hardy exchange of retaliations between warring parties. In *Tit for Tat* the Halls and the team's paths again cross as Stan and Ollie open a new retail store next door to the Hall's delicatessen. Soon the boys are recognized and remembered as they go to "pay their respects" to their new neighbors. Ollie enters the Hall's store with all smiles and gentlemanly neighborliness. As their identities register with all four of them, Ollie suggests, "Why not let bygones be bygones--you help our business and we'll help your business."

### People of Feeling

Laurel & Hardy are creatures of *feeling*. As children they live

according to their feelings and emotions, and according to their childlike natures they are very demonstrative. They are characterized by great depths of feeling, whether they are experiencing fear, sympathy, indignation, anger, love, or shame. Because they are children their feelings are terribly simple and exaggerated. Normally their feelings are intense and even extreme. As children their primary feeling is that of happiness, joy, celebration, and trust. In *Babes in Toyland* Stan is masquerading as Bo-Peep in an effort to keep her out of the clutches of the wicked Barnaby. He has captured Stan but thinking now he has the desirable Bo-Peep the wedding plans are set in motion. Barnaby thinks that he has married a shy, veiled Bo-Peep but has actually married Laurel instead. When Ollie tells him that he'll have to stay with Barnaby to protect Bo-Peep, Stan breaks down and cries, muttering "But I don't *love* him!"

Ollie, too, is a person of great feeling. In *Helpmates*, in the midst of extraordinary troubles caused by his and Stan's joint blunders, he moans half to himself and half to the gods, "It's enough to make a man bust out crying!" All of the Laurel & Hardy gestures, their full characterization, conveys great feeling. The Laurel cry, the Laurel smile, the Hardy camera stare, the tie twiddle all communicate human feeling.

### Enduring Spirits

In spite of fear, anxiety, and failure Stan and Ollie convey indomitable spirits. Always they are hopeful, enthusiastic, ambitious

to succeed. They face the future, usually, with confidence and pride when given half a chance. Whatever happens, even in the midst of total chaos, they will not be vanquished. They may be slowed down to a snail's pace and even reduced to its position in the world, but Laurel & Hardy survive indeed. They have a unique quality of turning destruction and assault into hope, albeit ever so slim. Again we turn to *Tit for Tat*. During the battle proportioned hostility raging between the boys and the Halls, Charlie Hall storms into the boys' shop, systematically plucks every pocket watch off a cardboard display rack, and throwing them into a blender cup places it on a malt machine and turns on the switch. With wonderful sound effects of metal crushing metal, accompanied by concerned and disbelieving looks by Stan and Ollie, he takes the cup from the machine and dramatically spreads a heap of distorted gears, bent springs, assorted screws and watch cases before his supposedly conquered opponents. Stan, however, thumbs through the wreckage in childlike curiosity and finding a random gear picks it up and spins it like a top! Satisfied with its amusement value he carefully puts it in his vest pocket for sake keeping for another day's pleasure. He has found a new *toy*. And in his celebration he has turned apparent defeat upside down! So much for this adventure, he might say, where do we go from here? Such is the revelation of the human spirit.

### Individuals

Important to their spiritual endurance is the fact that Stan

and Ollie have a strong sense of *individuality*. The familiar introduction of Hardy leads the way: "How do you do? I'm Mr. Hardy. And this is my friend, Mr. Laurel." As McCabe has expressed, the introduction as *Mr.* Hardy and *Mr.* Laurel is suggestive and actually reveals much about Stan and Ollie's characters.

This unvarying introduction marked them truly. It said in implication, 'No matter who you are, wherever you are in life, we are as good as you. We have dignity and we expect dignity in return. We may not get it but it is our right, and we look forward to it and that happy future that perhaps you, sir, might lead us to!'<sup>19</sup>

Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy simply want to be treated with kindness and respect. They are individuals. They have rights. And they have human dignity. Their business card in *From Soup to Nuts* reads:

"Laurel and Hardy--Waiters--All we ask is a Chance."

### Strangers

But, alas, chances are few and far between for Stan and Ollie, for they are *strangers* to the world. In terms of that world, they seem hopelessly out of step, incongruent. Never do they seem to fit. If by fortune they do find the pace (as in *The Second Hundred Years*), they seem to go off on a tangent in machine-like regimentation. The words of Thoreau in *Walden* seem especially appropriate to the characters of Laurel & Hardy:

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<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 120.

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.<sup>20</sup>

Stan and Ollie are in step with each other but their life music comes from a very different drummer. *Below Zero* offers a good example. In the middle of a harsh winter, as the snow falls and falls, street musicians Laurel & Hardy are playing their version of "In the Good Old Summertime" on accordion and bass. Needless to say, neither their performance nor their selection is popular with the public. A resident in a second story apartment asks them how much they make on one block. They tell him their net is usually twenty-five cents. He then tosses down a half-dollar and tells them to move down two blocks!<sup>21</sup> Finally their instruments are kicked into the street and flattened by a passing truck. One is led to ask, who is out of step: Stan and Ollie, or the world?

The boys as street musicians is most appropriate. It is customary in the Laurel & Hardy films that Stan and Ollie start out with very little and end up having even that destroyed. Generally they have the clothes on their backs and possibly a Tin Lizzie and more frequent than not either one or both of these is decimated. They are truly *vagabonds*. In *One Good Turn* they are living off the countryside, victims of the Depression. In *You're Darn Tootin* they are street musicians as a result of being fired from their positions with a city

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<sup>20</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), p. 290.

<sup>21</sup>Maltin, p. 33.

orchestra after making a shambles of things on the bandstand. They get into a fight with each other during which Ollie's instrument (their livelihood!) is invariably destroyed. In *Towed in a Hole* they purchase a ramshackled old boat as a means of eliminating the "middle man" in their fresh fish business. The enterprise ends in failure.

Stan and Ollie are *wanderers*, often without a sustained means of support. They are frequently carefree roamers. But in the viewpoint of society they are deemed irresponsible, shiftless, worthless, and disreputable. They are a visualization of the Old Testament prophesy: "You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."<sup>22</sup>

In many ways they are *disconnected* from time and space. Convicts Laurel & Hardy have customarily gotten themselves into deeper trouble during their prison term in *Pardon Us* and are sent to "The Hole," where they are to stay in solitary confinement for a month inside unlighted, dingy quarters. John McCabe describes the filmic moment.

A great moment of lunacy is reached when Stan stops the guard just before he is to enter his long stretch of oblivion. 'Pardon me,' he asks, 'do you have the time?' Ollie's camera look is pitious and lingering.<sup>23</sup>

That Stan's understanding of time is at best questionable is revealed in a delightful bit of humor in *The Laurel & Hardy Murder Case*. As a suspect in a string of murders, the Inspector questions Stan, "Where were you on the night of December 26th?" In his effort to

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<sup>22</sup>Gen. 4:12.

<sup>23</sup>McCabe, (New American) p. 123.

comprehend the meaning of the question, and to answer it, Stan goes through an audible "mental" process: "Septober, Octember, Nowonder." He does not get too far and neither does the Inspector.

*The Second Hundred Years* offers another good example of Stan's disconnectedness. While lined up in formation, convicts Stan and Ollie are standing at attention as part of a work detail. Stan turns to a typically criminal looking tough next to him and asks how much longer he's in for. The convict tells him that he's in for another forty years. Stan, relieved by the man's answer, turns to the con and takes an envelope from under his prison uniform and hands it to him and says, "Mail this for me when you get out, will ya?"

One Good Turn provides another nice touch to Stan's ambiguous position in time. The boys are forced to hobo-like existence, being victims of the Depression. They seem to be managing quite well on their humble earthly possessions when their campfire gets out of control, charring much of what meager things they have. They are reduced to panhandling. Ollie's approach to begging for a handout is characteristically gracious and debonair, reflecting the humble nature of his unfortunate situation. Stan's method is much more honest and to the point. In coming upon a nearby farmhouse the boys ask for subsistence (subsequently offering to work for their meal, they chop wood, which, of course, turns into a slapstick fiasco):

'We are victims of the depression,' explains Hardy, 'and we haven't eaten for three days.' 'Three days?' exclaims the kind old lady in horror, and Laurel helpfully adds, 'Yes-- yesterday, today, and tomorrow!' Undismayed, his hands pantomiming the delicate preparation of the simple repast



he is asking for, Hardy continues: 'I wonder if we could trouble you for a slice of buttered toast?' while Laurel chimes in, 'And while you're at it, could you slap a piece of ham on it?'<sup>24</sup>

### They are Very Pleasant Fellows

Babe Hardy's contention that basically Stan and Ollie are very pleasant guys, indeed, is an understatement. They have been loved these many years because they are so well-meaning and just a little admirable. They are children of feeling and are very thoughtful of their fellows. A scene from *Fra Diavolo* bears this out. In the film Stan and Ollie are ineffectual would-be bandits. As they come upon their first "victim," who is partially deaf and consequently does not understand the boys ill-intentions, Stan resorts to yelling: "We've come to take your money!" Finally the man realizes his fate and breaks out crying, muttering the pathetic tale of his poverty-stricken dependents. The bandits are moved to compassion by the woeful story and end up giving him all of their money!

The boys' thoughtful natures are again conveyed in *The Midnight Patrol*. Patrolmen Stan and Ollie are cruising their beat in their police car when they come across a safecracker practicing his trade. At first the boys interrupt him unaware of his real activity. Finally, when it dawns on them, they write out a citation which bogs down as they try to pick a day when the criminal can appear in court. Every date they designate, he is busy and won't be able to show up.

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<sup>24</sup>Everson, pp. 116f.

Accommodatingly, Stan and Ollie ask the safecracker what would be a *convenient* day for him. As the scene ends, the boys have graciously sacrificed their days off in order to bend to the thief's wishes!

### Friends

The ultimate Laurel & Hardy characterization is that Stan and Ollie are *friends*. The overriding implication of all the Laurel & Hardy films is that this friendship is the basis of their survival in a trouble-filled world. As Ollie describes in characteristic platitudinous form, they are "like two peas in a pod." The occasion for such a covenant occurs in *Sons of the Desert* as Stan and Ollie spend the night in the attic while hiding from the wives. In *A Chump at Oxford* Ollie has angrily resolved to walk out on his friend for good, deciding not to withstand any more insults from Stan, who is suffering from total amnesia. The crowning degradation comes as "Lord Paddington" (Stan's newly assumed identity) instructs Ollie, his personal servant, on the "proper" ways of an English butler, telling him to stand up straight, hold up his chest, stick in his stomach, and tuck in his chins--both of them! As Ollie storms out Stan recovers from his amnesia and asks him: "Where are you going?" Ollie, not realizing that Stan is his old self tells him that he is leaving for good. Stan, shattered and not knowing the reason for his friend's drastic behavior, begins the Laurel cry. The following moment can only be described as endearing. Ollie, already at the door and one moment from an earth-shattering departure, stops, and realizing that his lifelong friend

is once again his old self, laughs and embraces him exclaiming, "Stan, you know me!" Stan, completely unaware, replies, "Well, of course I know you!" This is truly a moment of rejoicing and celebration as the two embrace and jump up and down in happiness.

John McCabe describes beautifully the Laurel & Hardy friendship:

A striking feature of the Stan-Ollie friendship is that despite double indignities . . . the deep warmth between the two was never broken up for any time beyond a minute. From film to film, they become estranged but only fleetingly. Ollie is usually the fall guy . . . and if his anger is swift and terrible, the making-up process is equally swift--and pleasant. Ollie can never understand why Stan is so dumb and Stan can never understand why Ollie gets so indignant about something which, after all, is not *his* fault even though Ollie is glaring at him with head covered with water, oil, flour, tar, and/or molasses.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, Stan Laurel and Oliver Norvell Hardy can endure as long as they have one another.

#### INTERPRETATION

1) The theological significance of Stan and Ollie as children implies their limitation, their dependence. This condition is the same as ours. Ultimately we are children too. We are creatures dependent upon the entire life matrix. Even in all of his alleged sophistication, man is helpless in many ways. Childhood is not a predetermined set of years that we automatically put behind us when we "arrive" at maturity. Rather, the whole span of life is a journey through childhood during which we try to successfully fulfill a given stage or "task"

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<sup>25</sup>MCCabe, (New American) p. 107.

before moving on to the next period. We carry the child that is within us on this journey. In many ways, "adults" are simply big children, just like Laurel & Hardy. The very same devices that one used as a child are to be seen in one's adult life. Feelings and experiences such as joy and play are relived during meaningful sexual relationships. Anger, rejection, the need for acceptance and positive reinforcement, and the entire complex of child behavior is no different than the life experience of adulthood. Only the mode of expression changes and the purity of the feeling response. There is something to be said for the idea that "adults are dead children." It seems that "maturity" is often synonymous with inhibition, pretense, and "responsibilities." The "response-ability" that is largely inherent in a child's curiosity, excitement, and uninhibited freedom is somehow lost or at least dimmed as time takes its toll on a person. How many times have we wished to relive past days of freedom and carefree fun?

Theologically, it would seem that children are perhaps closer to life than are adults. They acknowledge their *dependence* and accept it, and generally deal with their world with a greater honesty. Childhood can be defined as life in celebration. Adulthood is often characterized by worry, role-playing, and pseudo-independence.

2) It is obvious that *Babes in the Woods* is a theological category. "Babe" connotes "defenseless," "fragile," "helpless." Perhaps, the phrase also implies new life, hope, or new being. We are all babes in the woods groping, searching, trying not to become lost. Our knowledge of the "woods" is limited. We did not create it. We

have only been set in the midst. We have been given life in the woods. It is our blessing; our promise. Even in the midst of danger.

The First Man and Woman were "Babes in the Woods." They lived by grace. They lived in harmony, in peace, in *shalom*. They lived in *innocence*. They accepted their creaturely nature and their dependence on the Creator. They also accepted their limitation and lived in obedience to given boundaries. There were restrictions, potential dangers, and unknowns, and relative to these they lived by faith, trust.

3) "I will make him a helper fit for him."<sup>26</sup> These words concern the First Man, Everyman. The Laurel & Hardy gag or theme of "Helpful Henry" is also a theological category. Man stands in need of help. He is not all things unto himself. He is *incomplete*. He needs others for his completeness. He needs to be made *whole*, in the midst of his brokenness. And yet, in spite of the situation in which man stands in need, he is frequently unable to give or receive help in any ultimate sense. Man is not the source of salvation or redemption. He has a part in it, he is responsible, but he is not the source. Most often we can offer only a gesture or a token of redemption, and assistance. For example, in suffering, in brokenness, and in death, we all are terribly alone, separated; only able to give and receive the help of *presence*.

Ollie's famous plea, "Why don't you do something to *help* me?"

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<sup>26</sup>Gen. 2:18.

in the midst of some awful calamity is profound. In *Midnight Patrol*, for example, Detectives Laurel & Hardy go through much trouble to break into a house that is the scene of a suspected prowler. After many unsuccessful attempts they decide to use a heavy concrete bench as a battering ram. Stepping backwards in order to gain momentum for their charge, Ollie plunges into a lily pond, pulling the stone bench in with him. "Why don't you do something to *help* me?" he gurgles and bubbles from the bottom of the pool, pinned there by the bench, as Stan stands there in helpless bewilderment. All of this is delightfully shown from an aerial camera shot.<sup>27</sup>

4) The Dimwit, the Slow Thinker has theological meanings by virtue of the reality that knowledge is a problem for man. There are many ramifications of Laurel & Hardy's gross ignorance. They are not alone in their problematic condition of not knowing enough to live peacefully, in fulfillment. For such is the human condition of which we are so inextricably a part. Stan and Ollie do not *understand* themselves or their puzzling environment. For them there is a barrier to knowledge. Likewise, for the First Man and Woman knowledge was problematic. Ultimately it became the source of their removal from harmony. Through their desire to become "wise," all-knowing, a wedge was driven between them and their fellow creatures. Through their desire to *be* God, they were separated *from* God and from the earth. Like Ollie, man remained ignorant and yet took on the illusion of rationality.

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<sup>27</sup>Everson, p. 144.

5) Through self-deception man thinks of himself in terms of his "integrity," his "character." Ollie believes himself to be morally whole, untouched, in tact, worthy. He is like the self-righteous Pharisee who believes in his own goodness, purity. He deludes himself into thinking that nothing is more important than his character. He patronizes his vanity. He thinks he is the most important person in the "garden." Because of his vanity he assumes that the laws of nature do not apply to him. Therefore, he will eat of any of the trees. He will overstep his bounds. He will live forever. He thinks too highly of himself. Because of this false "integrity," this vanity, this self-deception man tries to pass the responsibility of his disobedience off onto his coinhabitor.

6) Ollie's self-elevation is not his own. He is only symbolic of Adam's hubris. Both of them personify man's fraudulent attempt to escape his finite realities. When Adam denied his limit and refused his boundaries he exemplified Ollie's "anything you can do, Stan, I can do better" attitude. However, had Stan and Ollie been in the garden, instead of letting Stan pick the apple, Ollie would have pushed him out of the way, gesturing him gallantly to one side while spouting some platitude like, "If you want something done right, do it yourself!" But when confronted for the defilement, Ollie and Adam would have much in common. Surely Ollie would have said, "It's his fault," while pointing an accusing finger at Stan. He probably even would have been insulted and indignant that his Hardy good name was associated with such a crass deed. After all, his reputation would have been in

jeopardy.

What is even more fun to consider is the probability that had the couple in the garden been Stan Laurel and Oliver Norvell Hardy, the apple probably would have never gotten off the tree, at least not by design. Rather, more than likely it would have fallen on Ollie's tender and dignified head while napping. Or quite possibly it might have been knocked off inadvertently while Stan was rescuing a stranded kitten located precariously on the very top branch of the forbidden tree.

7) The First Man and Woman, like Ollie were "the dumbest kind" of persons. They were dumb people who thought they were smart. They so deceived themselves with their rationality they thought they could even fool God. Not only do men deny Being through their pretentious rationality, they try to conceal their foolishness with lies and half truths. Even when confronted by Being directly man deludes himself into believing that he can do exactly as he pleases. He even tries to *hide* from God's presence.

8) When his ignorance was exposed, when God revealed to Adam the folly of his cover-up and "cop-out" attempt, the result was *embarrassment*. When Ollie gets a clearer picture of himself from time to time he is often embarrassed by what he sees. Man's nakedness, his true nature, became a source of his embarrassment. When all of his cheap tricks were uncovered, his embarrassment before God overwhelmed him: "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid,



because I was naked; and I hid myself."<sup>28</sup>

9) *Fear* is a theological category. It is a human condition. It is Stan's and Ollie's condition. It is our situation as well. Fear is even part of the life experience of the First Man. When man is confronted by God, fear is his customary response. In the Birth Narratives, the initial response of the people is fear. The initial communication of God's spokesmen is "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people . . . ."

Fear becomes a barrier. It immobilizes man. It grabs him and makes his life impossible. Stan and Ollie invariably run away from reality, afraid. In their fright they cannot function, nor can they relate meaningfully. It is not a superficial addition to their character; it is fundamental to their identities. Stan and Ollie who are not fearful would not be the Laurel & Hardy we know. It would make them less human, less real, and less believable. We would not sense them as being of us nor would we recognize them as themselves.

10) Man has broken the bond with God through his acts of disobedience. He has severed the covenant and has become like a *stranger* to himself, his fellow, and the earth. As a result of his pride and arrogant actions he has become a *vagabond* like Stan and Ollie. He has suffered a disconnection from time and space. He is an aimless

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<sup>28</sup>Gen. 3:10.

meanderer akin to Stan Laurel. In the words of Paul Tillich: "His place does not know him anymore." Like Stan and Ollie, man wanders about the land without a livelihood. He seeks to live as if he were still abiding in harmony but now the earth is a reluctant place. He has been the defiler and now lives as a trespasser.

And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.'<sup>29</sup>

Man has been set apart; he is now isolated. Revenge is in his heart and forgiveness has become difficult. Brothers are separated by distrust and greed. People are as objects to one another, and are no longer integrally related. "Letting bygones be bygones" is less and less frequent among people who say, "You mind your business, and I'll mind my business"; "You go your way, and I'll go my way." In this sense man treats his fellows as "things." He himself has become a tool and consequently treats other persons as tools.

11) Anger and violence is one result of man's defilement of creation. Now he is no longer a companion at peace. Life becomes difficult and frustration becomes *prolonged*. Frustration is reduced to insult and anger of every kind. Man becomes aggressive and in his anger strikes out against his brother. Ollie's anger is Everyman's anger. His rage and frustration is not unlike our own. He is not

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<sup>29</sup>Gen. 4:11-13.

alone in his angry moments; we are with him, and so is all of humanity.

"So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell."<sup>30</sup>

Cain said to Abel his brother, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.'<sup>31</sup>

Anger and violence does not always manifest overt acts. Rather more subtle forms intimidate and dehumanize. Stan is clearly afraid of Ollie during fits of Ollie's anger. It causes him to be even more ineffectual. And what is more, it breeds hostility in him. Consequently, Stan and Ollie become trapped in another Laurel & Hardy eye-poking, nose-tweaking exchange. These fights occur because both of the boys have lost control. They have forgotten their limitation.

Such is the image of man emerging from the characterization of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. Traits like false pride, delusions of superiority, ignorance, anger, fear, and aggression all emerge from their personality portrayal. Their appearance is that of wonderful but foolish children. And we know Stan and Ollie intimately. Our personalities are so similar. We belong to the human drama that started a very long time ago. Laurel & Hardy are a mirror of the biblical drama, exaggerated for the sake of laughs but not distorted like the carnival mirror. Theirs reflects a likeness so near reality it is ludicrous. There is pain in our lives caused by experiences akin

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<sup>30</sup>Gen. 4:5.

<sup>31</sup>Gen. 4:8-10.

to those of the boys. We experience the same pain, the same arrogance, the same pretense, fear, guilt, and anger. If the Laurel and Hardy characters revealed only such manifestations as these they would be neither funny nor relevant. Rather the films would constitute mere perversion and cynicism.

Thankfully, however, the Laurel & Hardy films reveal two wonderfully human and warm personalities. They convey what it means to be human, for Stan and Ollie are individuals of great feeling, kindness, perseverance, and friendship. Ultimately they embody humanity. They are nothing less nor more than Everyman.

Theologically the fact that Stan and Ollie are people of deep feeling means they are *related* to creation in a primary way. "Feeling" must be differentiated from "emotion." There is plenty of pure emotionalism in the lives of the boys; the venting of feeling. But their rantings and agonizing exclamations point to an underlying dimension of feeling. "Feeling" can be defined as "a generalized sensation involving touch, contact, temperature, pressure, or physical pain or pleasure"; or "the undifferentiated background of one's awareness considered apart from any identifiable sensation, perception, or thought." Most generally, "feeling" is related to a continuum between pleasure and pain. Accordingly all human life falls within the scope of these definitions.

However, Laurel & Hardy seem to personify "raw" feeling on an elemental level. With them, processes of rationality and contemplation are most generally by-passed during the feeling experience. Stan

Laurel's cry, for instance, is not simply sentimentality, rather it is the emergence of elemental or primitive feeling. The same is true for Ollie's camera stare. As such, these nondiscursive experiences encompass Stan and Ollie's basic mode of relating to their world and to each other. They are undifferentiated but definite awareness. The Laurel & Hardy communicative gestures are primordial utterances of humanity. The feeling gestures of Laurel & Hardy convey creatures of feeling, noncalculating, unsophisticated, and pure. As such, Stan and Ollie are *vulnerable*. They are wide open to pain, to disappointment. But also they are susceptible to simple joys and pleasures long forgotten by scientific, more "rational" people.

Laurel & Hardy are two deeply feeling *individuals*. The *individuality* of Stan and Ollie has manifold meanings in a society bent on amassing wealth, mediocrity, and uniformity. Mass society selling styles, fads, conformity ironically professes "*individualism*." *Individualism* is not individuality; it simply denotes independent action. It suggests separatism. This culture is creating mass conformity simultaneously with *individualism*. The result in high density population areas is the fusion of hard values and personal isolation. The consequence is a culture in which people try to look the same in an effort to sublimate their loss of individuality.

Laurel & Hardy are true to their characters. Whatever the occasion they maintain their uniqueness, whether at an aristocratic banquet or a destitute hobo camp. They are distinguished from the group. Try as they may to assimilate and become like "the group,"

they fail. Their individuality is indomitable. They may not know their identities in an intellectual sense but when Ollie says, "Pardon me, I'm Mr. Hardy, and this is my friend Mr. Laurel" we gain a conviction that "the boys" are *individuals*.

Contemporary life patterns are destroying individuality. The infinite forms of Being are being shaped and reshaped by human efforts to control and dictate the planet. Through man's insensitivity and domination syndrome the multiplicity of life forms is being destroyed. In his aggressive and acquisitive life-style man is rapidly pushing much of the earth's individuality out of existence. This is applicable to the ecology of inanimate as well as animate forms. In the human society people's individuality is sold on the economic market. There is no room for individuals, whether speaking of trees, species, inanimates, or persons, when they constitute a barrier to "progress."

Equality is not conformity or sameness. Laurel & Hardy are individuals who do not "fit in." They are incompetent in performance skills, their appearance is different, they are not members of the "elite," but they are individuals. Neither are they to be seen as the representatives of a special "group," a "society," or country. They are simply *individuality*. They are persons.

The primary theological significance arising out of the Laurel & Hardy characters is their friendship. The friendship is their basis of hope in an unsympathetic world. Stan is Ollie's ongoing hope against loneliness, total isolation, judgment. Likewise, Ollie is Stan's source of help and understanding. Without one another there

would be no reliance, no affirmation, only judgment. The friendship is their assurance. It is the source of their mutual acceptance, their hope, their salvation. Without this relationship there would be no warmth, no confidence, no faith, in the Laurel & Hardy world.

On the other hand, the Stan and Ollie friendship is a source of mutual suffering. Each is the cause of judgment, denial, and failure. The friendship is both promise and judgment. It is blessing and yet disappointment. Their suffering is inevitable and avoidable. The source of their suffering is their humanity and inhumanity. The Stan-Ollie microcosm is weak and precarious. Each contributes to its frailty and each suffers as a result. In fact, Laurel & Hardy are fellow sufferers. They are both victims and perpetrators of their common suffering. They ultimately share their sufferings. In *Tit for Tat*, for example, Charlie Hall threatens Ollie, saying "I'll hit you so hard, *he'll* feel it," pointing to Stan.

The Stan-Ollie friendship makes victory possible. Alone, either of them would soon be crushed to final defeat. Their strength is in their bond of communal weakness. Their "victory" may be questionable at best, shaky, and painfully temporary. But nonetheless, there *is* a Laurel & Hardy victory. Perhaps it is to be found in a final flight to freedom after some innocently inspired mayhem with "the law." Or perhaps "besting" a cantankerous protagonist is the height of Laurel & Hardy's achievements. Or maybe a genuine escape into hilarity is a type of victory in an ugly and hateful society. However, the most cherished victory of all is the "shaky but eternal friendship" of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy in a world set upon their destruction.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE WORLD OF LAUREL & HARDY

We come now to the world of Laurel & Hardy. Already we have some idea of Stan and Ollie's condition by virtue of their characters. Their personalities, however, include their environment and, in fact, are somewhat determined by the attitudes and behavior of their surrounding world.

Ollie best describes the Laurel & Hardy world, perhaps, with his deceiving but revealing exclamation: *Here's another fine mess you've gotten me into!* This declaration is reserved customarily for moments in the lives of Stan and Ollie when fortune has all but crushed them with a final devastating blow. It is Ollie's line. He seems to sense the magnitude of their predicament more than Stan, or perhaps Stan simply suffers in silence while the demonstrative Ollie must vocalize his despair and pain.

The nature of the Laurel & Hardy calamities is humanly initiated and perpetuated. Usually the "fine mess" is the result of arrogance, ignorance, rage, or a combination of the three. Somehow, as is typical of the Laurel & Hardy world, Ollie bears the brunt of the "mess." This is only fitting since his pride and arrogance have assured him the lead position in the Laurel & Hardy blunders.

What befalls the boys happens to Ollie first simply because he is so insistent on being the authority in everything. Perhaps this is



the true meaning of, "the first shall be last and the last first." And is this not also the meaning of the Beatitude, "the meek shall inherit the earth"? Truly in the world of Laurel & Hardy the most insistent or pushy person shall be the last one to avoid judgment. And normally the last one will get off lightly. This is not to say, however, that the meeker of the two does not also suffer his share. Stan does suffer the "mess" with Ollie. Is this not definitive of the human situation, namely that people have a share in one another's sufferings? Perhaps Stan's mental vacuity is the cause, or perhaps Ollie's fits of childish anger lead the two to their *coup 'd grace*. However, whatever are the combined reasons for the team's suffering and incompetence, it is certain that Stan fails out of the whole scheme of his personal fortune, while Ollie "self destructs" due to his disastrous personality traits.

"HERE'S ANOTHER FINE MESS, YOU'VE GOTTEN ME INTO!"

Even in Ollie's most fundamental and dramatic acknowledgment of his predicament, his self-deception is overwhelming. The last half of the exclamation is so typical to Ollie's character: "Here's another fine mess, *you've gotten me into!*" Stan acknowledges his own limitation, hence the Laurel cry. Ollie, however, does not. He is not even aware of his primary condition. This is his grossest failure and his fundamental self-deception: " . . . *you've gotten me into!*" Ollie does not acknowledge or accept his given creatureliness, his limitation. This phrase symbolizes his ultimate failure to assume

responsibility for his own actions. We laugh at the great comedy of the clause because we know so well its meaning. It exposes our own attitudes and failure to be responsible selves. We know projection when we are confronted with it.

Often the situation that gives Ollie rise to make his "another fine mess" declaration comes at the end of the Laurel & Hardy films. *Going Bye Bye* is one example. The plot of the film is the vow of revenge by a convicted killer who is sent to prison for a life sentence because of the key testimony of Stan and Ollie. The murderer vows to escape and "get even" for the boys' damaging testimony and, more than that, for Stan's indignant inquiry: "Aren't you going to hang him?" The convict subsequently does escape, and, as Laurel & Hardy fortune would have it, unknowingly happens upon the team during his escape effort. The terrible revenge wrought upon Stan and Ollie occurs off-screen, but when the two boys are revealed for the final scene they are literally tied in knots, with their feet bent grotesquely behind their heads. Then comes the inevitable: *Here's another fine mess, you've gotten me into!*

A similar finale occurs in *The Bullfighters*. The plot is simple. Stan strikes an amazing resemblance to a renowned bullfighter. He is mistakenly identified as the famous matador and becomes involved with a group of racketeers who have an invested interest in the real bullfighter. When Stan seems an alarmingly reluctant hero, refusing to even go into the ring with one of those mean bulls, the head gangster threatens the boys that he personally will "skin them alive" if they

try to doublecross him. After the characteristic Laurel & Hardy misadventures with the gangsters the final scene shows Stan and Ollie "skinned alive." Their heads appear as always, but their bodies are classic skeletons, jiggling and rattling. As they walk toward the camera, somewhat stoicly resigned to their newest predicament, Ollie turns to Stan and says, *Well, here's another fine mess, you've gotten me into!*

Another occasion for the famous Hardy line comes in the final scene of *Thicker Than Water*. During the film Ollie has incurred the wrath of Mrs. Hardy with the help of Stan, of course. As a result he has to be rushed to the hospital for emergency treatment. A blood transfusion is necessary and Stan is taken as the "volunteer," in spite of his efforts to escape. During the transfusion attempt the doctor has bungled the procedure and inadvertently pumps too much blood out of Stan. In an effort to rectify his mistake he then pumps blood out of Ollie and back into Stan. The two bloods become hopelessly mixed and confused, with the result that the two personalities have become inextricably mingled. In the final scene the two are wearing the other one's costume. Laurel, in Ollie's clothes and moustache, pantomimes the Hardy gestures and says, *Here's another fine mess you've gotten me into!* while Ollie, minus his moustache and dressed in Stan's clothes, breaks down into the Laurel cry.

### Violence

Such are the occasions of Ollie's trademark utterance. The

nature of its occurrence reveals much about the Laurel & Hardy world. The first characteristic of that world is the condition of *violence*. John McCabe has coined a term referring to the element of violence in the Laurel & Hardy film genre. He calls it *reciprocal destruction*. Indeed, some of their films are actually essays in violence and destruction. Much ado has taken place regarding this "excessive" Laurel & Hardy violence. Such accusations have become commonplace. However, this criticism is more than erroneous; it is, in fact, irresponsible. When one considers the American life-style and its current saturation of brutal and freakish violence in the cinema and television production, one must simply be shocked by such negligence and decadence. Relative to such displays, Laurel & Hardy seem pacifistic.

Even in the midst of the entire realm of the Laurel & Hardy eye-poking, head bumping, and nose-tweaking, no one is ever destroyed. There is pain, to be sure, but even it is often minimized by not showing the actual violent and aggressive act. The film-makers simply leave it to the audience's imagination and make it a vicarious experience aided by effective sound and showing the hilarious results of such developments. What is destroyed, however, are man's pretensions, his devices of dignity, arrogance, and pride. William Everson speaks of the "pain" in the world of Laurel & Hardy as being an "illusion." It is terrible and bone crunching, but it is also quick, temporary, and somehow life is interrupted by it only momentarily. The victims get up, shake themselves heartily as if to render a quick repair job, and jump right back into the thick of things. There is no

blood, no gore, no repulsion.

And yet, the Laurel & Hardy films are full of *virtual* violence. The material is too copious to cover in full. However, a general listing of the films that most express this theme is helpful: *Battle of the Century*; *Big Business*; *Two Tars*; *Them Thar Hills*; *You're Darn Tootin*; *Men O' War*; *Should Married Men Go Home?*; *Tit for Tat*; and *The Perfect Day*. This listing represents quite a volume, but, by no means, does it exhaust the occurrences of reciprocal violence in the Laurel & Hardy films.

The form of the Laurel & Hardy reciprocal violence actually created a new comic genre. The Laurel & Hardy style of violence is contrasted to the impulsive uncontrolled fits of rage characterized by the Keystone type. It is what William Everson calls "civilized" violence. The pace is slow, deliberate, controlled, and builds with an undisputed logic. Usually the exchange starts over nothing at all; "a misunderstanding, an imagined insult, a pure accident." The violence builds with a kind of "businesslike" professionalism. It begins with a simple single action, followed by two simple reactions, and so on. "The beauty of all these exchanges is in their rich contrast of savage temper explosions with calm and orderly reasoning processes."<sup>1</sup>

The Laurel & Hardy reciprocal violence and destruction manifests at least two important realities. One includes the *direction* of violence, and the second of these reveals the fact that man actually

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<sup>1</sup>William K. Everson, *The Films of Laurel & Hardy* (New York: Citadel Press, 1967), p. 29.

*enjoys* his violence by the mere fact he willingly becomes an active or passive participant.

The basic format for all Laurel & Hardy violence remains the same. In the films one can see an obvious "direction" and enjoyment. Customarily it all begins with an exchange between two people, usually Stan and Ollie. Or, often the basic participants are three: Stan and Ollie "solidly united for once" against a protagonist who is usually James Finlayson "of the bald head, pickle-shaped nose, and walrus moustache" variety. Often the intended action misfires and involves an innocent bystander, who in turn retaliates for his unprovoked assault, and so on it builds and gains momentum until all reason has long since vanished. The direction of the violence increases from one to many, resulting finally in an enraged mob scene.

*The Battle of the Century* is a classic example of the Laurel & Hardy form of violence. In the film Stan is a prize fighter. Ollie, of course, is his not too sympathetic manager. Ollie is sold on the idea that an insurance policy on Stan could be very lucrative in light of his injury prone occupation. He is told that a single two dollar policy will yield \$500.00 for a single broken arm or leg. After borrowing the two dollars from Stan he proceeds to scheme an "accident" in order to collect on Stan's misfortune. He buys a banana (what else!), peels it and devotes much effort to throwing the peel in Stan's path, unsuccessfully. Each time, Stan misses the peel, completely unaware of Ollie's ill-intentions. Finally, the peel finds its victim. But instead of Stan, it is Ollie who slips, doing an appropriate

pratfall.

Stan Laurel described *The Battle of the Century* to John McCabe:

We come to a bakery shop with a pie wagon standing in front. Hardy drops the peel for me on the sidewalk there, and the pieman comes along with a big tray of pies, and slips on the peel. He's covered with pies. As he clears his eyes, he happens to see Hardy pushing the banana into my hand, and realizes that Hardy is trying to put the blame on me. An argument starts, ending up with the pieman pushing a pie in Hardy's face. I resent this and push a pie in the pieman's face. Hardy laughs at this and the guy, instead of hitting me back, hits Hardy with another pie. At this point, a stranger passing by tries to stop the argument, and gets the pie in the face, too. Gradually, one by one, other people get into the argument until finally the entire street, a full block, is pie-crazy. Everybody is pie-throwing happy. The camera goes up to take a panorama view of all these people throwing, throwing, throwing. There are pies thrown into a dentist's office, in windows, out of them. Nothing but pies--thousands of them. Then a cop who, of course, is all covered with pie, arrests us and is taking us away, but *he* slips on the banana peel--falls down a manhole for the finish.<sup>2</sup>

*The Battle of the Century* provides an excellent model of "reciprocal violence." It characterizes well the widening dimensions of violence as the aggression encompasses everyone within a wide range. This format is followed in many Laurel & Hardy pictures. In *Men O' War*, for example, a melee is initiated when an observer calls Stan and Ollie a couple of "dumbbells" as they incompetently try to row their boat. This insignificant gesture results in an insane brawl as finally thirteen people climb into Stan and Ollie's rowboat and battle it out in an enraged cushion fight as the boat sinks slowly into the lake.

The direction of the Laurel & Hardy violence seems to be

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<sup>2</sup> John McCabe, *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1961), pp. 128f.

conditioned by inertia. This is to say that once it is set into motion it continues along a fixed course affecting everything in its path. In this sense it is both terribly personal and at the same time impersonal. It is simply perpetual. According to the "set" or direction of the destruction, a person is singled out almost fatalistically. If a person is innocently positioned behind a man who is the target of a custard pie, and if the intended target ducks, there is immediately a new target, unintentionally, but nevertheless a target.

The "destructive path" characteristic of violence finds a beautifully symbolic expression in the closing scene of *The Finishing Touch*. "Contractors" Stan and Ollie agree to build a house for a new client, but whose effort nets the predictable results. When the house is completed, it becomes evident it will not stand even the weight of a bird that untimely lands on the chimney, causing essential parts of the structure to dissociate themselves from the rest of the fiasco. Watching doors, windows, assorted boards fall off his newly completed house, the unhappy home owner understandably demands his money back. The action quickly degenerates into a rock throwing exchange between the boys and their furious client. While searching for appropriate ammunition Stan picks up the rock that is acting as a brake for the boys' truck. The rest of the story seems to tell itself. The runaway truck and the house are on a collision course, with inevitable contact. The truck's impact is all that is necessary to give the already shaky house "the finishing touch."

Apparently the direction of the truck's destructive path



would be sufficient to imply the "direction" of violence. However, there is a sequel: a further *line* of destruction. The film closes as the enraged customer, Ollie, and Stan are extended in a long, straight line from far background to immediate foreground. William Everson provides a description of the final action:

The victimized home-owner heaves a rock at Hardy. Its passage through the air is invisible, but Hardy's hat is almost instantly whisked off; then, after a proportionately overlong delay, Laurel's hat is also plucked from his head as the invisible rock continues on its vengeful way.<sup>3</sup>

*Swiss Miss* has a similar closing scene which equally visualizes the nature and direction of violence. In an earlier sequence Stan and Ollie have a hair-raising flight from an angry gorilla who is chasing them over a swinging foot bridge. During the chase the gorilla falls into a deep chasm. As the gorilla literally disappears into the spectacular canyon the audience knows that he is surely gone forever. But alas! In the final scene the gorilla reappears with head, arms, and legs bandaged and sporting crutches. Stan and Ollie, terrified, leave the little Alpine village in double time with crutch-waving angry gorilla in hot pursuit. Suddenly, the gorilla, in the immediate foreground, stops and holding the crutch by the tip, swings it overhead while taking aim on the dwarfed derby-topped figures running hoppity-like in the distance. With primitive strength the disabled gorilla flings his makeshift weapon down a lonely deserted road toward his fat and skinny targets. In a long shot the whirling crutch is seen arcing up, up, and along its revengeful path when, with

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<sup>3</sup>Everson, p. 58.

Robin Hood accuracy, it finds its home, flattening Stan and Ollie with a single blow. Demonstrating his elation over such fine marksmanship, the gorilla happily jumps up and down in excitement.

And so violence is directional, and once set in motion pursues its course until all within its path is knocked down or at least left teetering in its wake. Once established the destructible mechanism is very difficult to detour to stop. It appears to have an intelligence or will of its own, or it seems to be so unalterably impersonal it is simply whirling, moving matter. It is uncontrollable, and hence easily gets out of hand. In this sense, the violence rampant in Laurel & Hardy's world is terribly logical and predictable, even if it is non-sensical.

The Laurel & Hardy violence is defined by *escalation*. One bump on the head leads to a retaliatory bump plus a poke in the eye. The violence and destruction builds. It is not only an eye-for-an-eye. Rather, it is an eye-for-an-eye plus a kick in the shins as the reprisal usually out-does the original transgression.

There are clear images from the world of Laurel & Hardy that man enjoys his violence. In *Two Tars*, Stan and Ollie sneak a self-satisfied smile of approval after a minor traffic incident has turned into an incredible scene of fighting and mutual destruction of nearly every car in sight. Clearly the boys have enjoyed getting the best of their many opponents. In *Big Business* this same gesture is witnessed. In every case there is a "gallery" of bystanders who thoroughly enjoy the building retaliation of antagonists. Normally they are drawn into

the melee as some flying object unintentionally singles somebody out in the crowd as a likely victim. And, without exception, this is sufficient provocation to bring the wronged party into full-fledged combat. The fact that enjoyment is an element in the Laurel & Hardy violence becomes evident further whenever someone intrudes in an effort to restore peace and sanity to the warring parties. Invariably the interloper not only is ignored, he quickly becomes a belligerent as his good intentions are trounced, dunked, mangled, or covered with pie. His peace efforts die a sudden death as he is personally brought into the mayhem.

### Danger

The Laurel & Hardy world is a place of *danger*. Their films convey the meaning of Tillich's words: "there is no safety in the world." Stan and Ollie are confronted constantly by wives, employers, landlords, neighbors, strangers, and machines that constitute many perilous sources. And yet, in spite of ongoing jeopardy, they remain babes-in-the-woods. An ingenious line stuffed with double meaning occurs in *Do Detectives Think?* Private Detectives Laurel & Hardy are sent to protect a judge (James Finlayson) from an escaped murderer who has vowed revenge. Finlayson's death sentence and accompanying vindictive comment--"And I hope you choke!"--has made him very unpopular with the killer. The judge, having read about the killer's escape and remembering his malicious remark is terrified. Ollie confidently assures the frightened Finlayson: "Why you're as safe from danger as

we are!"

### The Machine

People do not present the only source of danger in the world of Laurel & Hardy. Stan and Ollie find their world to be full of factories and machines that are no less than menacing. Machines are uncontrollable and depersonalizing as their own laws live in conflict with the boys. Stan and Ollie are at odds with the inanimate world, which actually seems more alive than anything else, when in the vicinity of the incompetent duo. When in the hands of Stan or Ollie, "things" simply operate according to laws unknown to them.

There is no finer image of man against machine than *The Music Box*. It is three full reels of a continuing struggle between Stan and Ollie against an unwilling and persistent piano. Between the piano and the unyielding laws of gravity, the two principals of the Laurel & Hardy Cartage Co. have their work cut out for them as they attempt to deliver it to a house situated at the top of a high hill. The only thing separating the piano from its new home is Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, the obstinate will of the piano itself, and at least ten flights of narrow, steep stairs! No matter what the boys may do, the piano either falls out windows, crashes on some part of Ollie's exhausted body, or runs wildly back down the stairs from whence it came.

The boys, like-wise, have trouble with machines in nearly all of the Laurel & Hardy films. In *Busy Bodies*, for example, they accidentally run their Tin Lizzie through a buzzsaw cutting the entire

car in half lengthwise. *Hog Wild* is an essay on the theme of man against devices, as the boys try in vain to erect a radio antenna. In *Tit for Tat* they have trouble with an electric curling iron, a meat slicer, and an electric billboard. In *Helpmates* Stan manages to blow up Ollie's entire house when trying to light a fire in the fireplace using gasoline. *The Finishing Touch* and *Towed in a Hole* have the boys mishandling carpenter tools with catastrophic results. *Dirty Work* shows chimney sweeps Stan and Ollie literally destroying an entire chimney in their efforts to clean it. And in *Blockheads* Stan is characteristically effective while "adjusting" to civilian life upon being discharged after twenty years of military life. He has his problems with the new modern gadgets. He proceeds to empty a dumptruck load of sand onto Ollie who is innocently sitting in his car, waiting for Stan to move the truck from in front of his home. Moments later he demolishes the car--and the garage. The last thing that Ollie can call his own, left untouched by his pal, is his apartment. But it too goes as Ollie attempts to cook Stan a steak. The boys cannot walk into a kitchen without eventually blowing up the stove--and the kitchen.

In *Saps at Sea* Ollie suffers at the hands of industrialized society. He and Stan are employees of the "Sharp and Pierce Horn Factory." Ollie soon goes berserk and suffers a nervous breakdown. Shouting "Horns! Horns! Nothing but horns!" Stan and Ollie consult Doctor Finlayson who orders an extended rest for Ollie's shattered nerves. The film continues to tell the tale of their "restful" vacation

aboard their newly purchased yacht.

### Frustration

If the world of Laurel & Hardy is filled with anything one would probably have to say that it is *frustration*. Ollie's life is one of prolonged frustration. Failure follows failure. Setback begets setback. Every smallest task goes wrong. He and Stan begin with very little and seemingly finish with less. Whether at home, or out in the business world, or "getting away from it all" on a leisurely vacation, Laurel & Hardy's human experience is dominated by prolonged frustration. Ollie conveys this beautifully as he endures Stan's ineptitude again and again. But, with each incredibly dumb deed, frustration increases as his patience decreases until finally nerves are jingled, and sooner or later shattered by some kind of climax.

The Laurel & Hardy films are essays on the nature of human relationships. It has already been noted that misunderstanding is a major ingredient in the Laurel & Hardy world. The boys continually misinterpret life around them and this usually has ramifications both in their relationship and in their dealings with others. Mistrust is one such misunderstanding. In *Tit for Tat*, jealous Charlie Hall suspects his wife of having flirtatious dealings with Ollie. After jumping to the wrong conclusions upon seeing Ollie and Mrs. Hall walk arm in arm from the Hall's bedroom, Mr. Hall tells his wife: "From now on I'm going to keep one eye on him, and the other eye on you!" Mrs. Hall replies, "Oh, you make me sick!"

Domestic Disharmony

The films of the Thirties and Forties often displayed a universal theme called "Momism." This is composed of the classic, theatrical domestic format of the shrewish, overpowering, nagging, mom-like wife. The films of Laurel & Hardy are no exceptions. Although they do not duplicate the predominantly domestic humor of W. C. Fields, they do strike a close resemblance. Domestic comedy was a contemporary theme in which every working family man in the country identified. However, unlike Fields' home predicament, the Laurel & Hardy films do not confront Stan and Ollie with bratty, spoiled, whiny kids. But, the W. C. Fields and the Laurel & Hardy wives have much in common.

William Everson correctly categorized the Laurel & Hardy women into two types. The first of these includes several variants, but generally they can be classified into the gold-digging, out-for-a-joyride, scheming, floozie variety. The second portion of the Laurel & Hardy womanhood, he simply refers to as "The Wives." "The Wives" normally are rather deceptive in appearance, for although they are petite and often quite attractive they can only be described as "man-eating." They often display extraordinary feats of strength as they transform common household items into near lethal projectiles, jettisoning pots, pans, dishes, and rolling pins at their unprotected spouses. As Everson describes the Laurel & Hardy wives, " . . . (they are) a sore-headed, shrewish, grasping bunch; forever snapping, shouting, nagging, domineering, hoarding every dollar, begrudging

their husbands an occasional night out . . ."4 To be sure, they are a far cry from their common contemporary film heroine who is fair, defenseless, and a worthy prize. If the boys by nature are a source of domestic disharmony, "The Wives" with their irate tempers and volatile short fuses are an even greater source of home hostility.

Not only are the Laurel & Hardy homes scenes of human aggression, misunderstanding, and explosive arguments, they are visibly destitute of love and human affection. Everson conveys a memorable breakfast table scene in *Thicker Than Water* in which the Hardy world is, for once, running smoothly--almost.

The sun is shining, he is happy, the breakfast is to his liking, and to show his appreciation of the little woman, he pays her a flowery compliment, puckers his lips into a kiss, and transfers that kiss of his spouse with an eloquent gesture of his forefinger. In mid-table, and without looking up from what she is doing, Mrs. Hardy intercepts the loving finger and bites it with a resounding crunch!5

The Laurel & Hardy format rarely has Stan married, but when he is, his household is more tranquil simply because of his passive submission to his overbearing wife. As Everson points out, the comparable "bliss" of the Laurel household only provides a painful contrast to Ollie's futile and stormy efforts to assert his masculinity. Instead, Stan is usually portrayed as Ollie's pal who Mrs. Hardy invariably hates with a passion, treating him something akin to the plague. In *Blockheads*, for instance, Mrs. Hardy's treatment of him is thoroughly insulting, finally referring to him as, "that little worm who is trying to break up my happy home." Later she calls him a "knickknack." After

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*



she storms out of the house, refusing to stay under the same roof with another one of Ollie's "tramp" friends, Stan asks, "What's a knickknack?" Ollie replies, "Oh, a knickknack is what sets on a whatnot!" Clearly the definition has only added to Stan's original haze.

McCabe has observed that the "Momism" theme works perfectly in the Laurel & Hardy world because it offers the ultimate contrast: "two very stupid husbands trying to out-wit two crafty and shrewish wives."<sup>6</sup> It is also very effective because it is so natural to the boys' characters. They are children parented by mom-like wives. They only want to go out and play; whereas the wives have something very different in mind for them.

### Isolation

The Laurel & Hardy world is marked by man's *isolation*. This human separation is conveyed in two Hardy lines that express the full meaning of existential categories. When things have degenerated to their very worst, Ollie utters one of two plaintive remarks. The final scene in *Helppmates* is just such an occasion. The picture is one in which Ollie suffers again and again at the hands of Stan's well-meaning but reversed "help." The boys are cleaning up Ollie's house after a "wild party" in his wife's absence. In the process Stan manages to break dishes, soak Ollie with a blast from the garden hose, ruin his only three suits, plus other equally "helpful" deeds.

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<sup>6</sup>John McCabe, *Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 93.

Finally, Ollie leaves to pick up his wife at the train station, leaving Stan to finish the clean-up duty before he brings Mrs. Hardy home. Later, Ollie returns, not with Mrs. Hardy, but with a new shiny black eye. What he returns to is the burned out shell of what used to be his home. In his absence, Stan managed to burn the house to the ground, excepting the chimney, the front door, and a single living room chair. The sight is just the finishing touch to Ollie's already disheartening day. His defeat is beyond retaliation. Scanning the rubble he looks over the scene of the disaster as Stan futilely spouts water about the charred wreckage from a garden hose. He tries to find out what happened but only gets a gulped explanation amidst Stan's pitious cry: he was only trying to light a little fire in the fireplace so when they came home everything would be nice and warm. Ollie sinks into the remaining chair. Stan says, "Well, I'll be going now." Ollie replies with a helpless, "Good bye." "I guess there's nothing else I can do," says Stan. "No," counters Ollie, "I guess not." Stan then walks to the front door. "Hey!" adds Ollie, "Would you mind closing the door? *I'd like to be alone.*" The scene fades out with Ollie sitting ever so alone in his roofless, wall-less house as it begins to rain.

The other Hardy expression conveying man's ultimate isolation comes, likewise, in the midst of extraordinary misadventures. *Dirty Work* is a prime example. In the picture chimney sweeps Stan and Ollie are laboring in the home of a crazy scientist who has discovered a rejuvenation formula having fountain of youth capabilities. The

doubtful chimney sweeps move closer to a large vat containing the secret wonder solution. Ollie climbs up on the edge of the tank in order to conduct his own experiment in an effort to validate the professor's claim, when accidentally Stan bumps him into the questionable liquid. After much bubbling and foaming, and panicked and painful shouting, Ollie reappears on the tank's edge but in the form of a chimp! A single and typically Hardy utterance emerges from the chimp's abundant lips: *I have nothing to say!*

The example of man's separation occurring in *Tit for Tat* has already been mentioned. Reiterating, however, there are two significant comments relevant to the discussion. During an exchange between Charlie Hall and Ollie, Hall says: "You mind your business, and I'll mind my business!" Indignantly Ollie retorts, "Be that as it may! Henceforth we'll neither nod nor speak! You go your way; and we'll go our way!" These lines symbolize prevailing attitudes and behavior in the world of Laurel & Hardy, and in our common experience. Especially true today, is the reluctance and refusal to relate, to get involved, to bridge the separation, the isolation existing between people.

### Social Injustice

The breakdown of human relationships in the world of Laurel & Hardy has the resulting effect of *social injustice*. The social condition of Stan and Ollie's world is aptly summarized in the words of the warden during his orientation speech to the newly-arrived prisoners, Laurel & Hardy, in *Pardon Us*: "Obey the rules, and you'll get along

just fine; break them and you'll find this place HELL ON EARTH!" Already the boys had "broken the rules," which was what landed them in prison to begin with. They made homebrew and imprudently sold it to a prohibition agent. The fact that such illegal activity was commonplace is public knowledge. What is additionally significant is that in Stan and Ollie's world, it would be Stan and Ollie's fortune to pick a revenuer as their first customer. And so they suffer for their naivete, while those more crafty and versed in the ways of the world prosper. In American society equality is equated with conformity. Those who conform to cultural values and social mores are treated "equally" while nonconformists are often shunned and forced to pay dearly for their uniqueness. Likewise, it is especially evident today that the "little man" suffers the full burden of the law while those having political and economic power escape with lighter sentences and judgments.

### The Law

Basically American social "justice" means adhering to the *Law*. There are, of course, many kinds of laws; some are written, while others are unwritten, but no less binding. Laurel & Hardy seemingly find most of them incomprehensible, and consequently have a continuing conflict with authority. Neither do they understand their suffering and admonitions that come during their pursuit of living according to the many "laws" of society. It would seem they want only to be "law abiding": to work honestly for a day's wages and to pay their own

way. They spend much effort to abide by social conventions such as manners. Quite often they show good old "yankee" ingenuity in their struggle toward "The American Dream" of success and wealth. As their business sign in their store window reads in *Tit for Tat*: "Open for Big Business." They try so hard. In fact, their thirst for acceptance (which means success and conformity in their world) is insatiable and their drive for equality is heroic. The Laurel & Hardy spirit is uncannily enduring. And yet, like boys in their father's workshop, they are bound to suffer in a world that is just as strange and dangerous. They suffer because they do not know, and because they are so trusting and innocent.

### The World as Incomprehensible

For the most part, the world is *incomprehensible* to Stan and Ollie. They dwell in a place the ways of which they do not understand. Their lives are full of confusion. In *Men O' War*, for example, there is a perplexing misunderstanding. Stan and Ollie, while strolling through a park, come upon a stray pair of lady's underwear. Looking about to see who might be the rightful owner, they notice two lovely girls who also happen to be enjoying a leisurely afternoon walk. Being the gentlemen they are they seek to return the panties in question to the nearby flappers, who they assume to be the rightful owners. Simultaneously, it is revealed that one of the ladies has lost something indeed: a pair of white gloves. Ollie indicates that he has found what they must be looking for, but, of course, he is too shy to say

exactly what it is that he has found. With embarrassed and boyish gestures he says, "I bet you miss them." "Well!" retorts the Miss, "you can just imagine!" She adds, "They were so easy to slip off; and I washed them in gasoline just this morning!" "Can you describe them?" inquires Ollie. "Well, they button on the side," retorts the young girl. "Good thing we're having warm weather," adds Ollie. And so the miscommunication continues, each exchange causing Ollie no end of bewilderment gestured through timely camera looks. Finally resolution comes when a patrolman, who has found the missing gloves, returns them, bringing a delayed but much needed clarification to Ollie's puzzled experience.

A similar confusion takes place in *Wrong Again*. The boys are stablehands at a race track. While tending to their chores Ollie reads a headline, "Famous Blue Boy Stolen." Confusion sets in since they just finished putting "Blue Boy" in his stall at the stables. The headlines, of course, referred, not to a horse, but to the art masterpiece. And since a large reward was offered for the return of "Blue Boy" to its millionaire owner, Stan and Ollie appropriate the race horse from the stables and return it to the address given in the newspaper article. Things become terribly difficult when Ollie makes an inquiry, asking from his position outside, where they should put the newly found "Blue Boy." Answering, from his upstairs bedroom, the millionaire looks down, and, thinking Ollie and Stan are delivery men, tells them to put "Blue Boy" on the piano! Naturally the instructions are followed exactly. When Stan inquires about this

strange procedure, the all knowledgeable Ollie, taking Stan into his wise counsel, tells him that millionaires always do things differently from working people. He assures Stan that they are all eccentric and do everything "twisted around." This initial explanation is followed by a wonderful, gestured conversation between Ollie and the now comprehending Stan, during which he offers Ollie ample feedback concerning his new knowledge.

The image that the world is more than just a wee bit puzzling for Stan and Ollie is symbolized in *Me and My Pal* as the two, along with the help of several strangers, pore over a giant jigsaw puzzle in earnest concentration. The puzzle, a wedding present from Stan to Ollie, ultimately leads to the cancellation of the wedding and not only the loss of the bride-to-be, but her fortune as well. It seems that the boys should have been at the church, like the rest of the wedding party, instead of working the jigsaw puzzle! Life is truly a puzzle to the pair. That this is clearly so is driven home effectively in *Pardon Us*, as the warden philosophizes about Stan and Ollie's brief but traumatic prison term:

'Boys, . . . those warning shots you fired in the dining hall saved us from a disaster of *cataclysmic* proportions!' This is becoming difficult to follow. They frown in slight apprehension. Perhaps this father-figure--like the rest of the world--is not going to be able to tell them where to look for that happy future. 'Boys, . . . I want you to look on these few months of your life here as simply a *hiatus*!' Stan's eyelids, glued together it seems with kindergarten paste, open slowly and stare in massive bewilderment; Ollie's eyes jerk open wider in profound vacuity. Once again the world has failed them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 123f.

### The World as Unsympathetic

If the world is a mystery and incomprehensible to Laurel & Hardy, it is also an *unsympathetic* one. Generally, there is no sympathy, no affection, no warmth given to Stan and Ollie from the world around them. It is a cold place, with little understanding. The boys do not get much help on their journey. The closing sequence of *Hog Wild* is a harrowing "chase" scene in which Stan, with one hand, is trying to drive a Tin Lizzie through traffic in the middle of town at breakneck speed, and simultaneously, with the other hand, hold on to a ladder from the top of which Ollie is hanging on for dear life. Invariably, the car gets on streetcar tracks and for a climax is literally compressed, accordion fashion, as it is smashed between one stationary and one high-speed trolley. Lucky to escape such a collision with their lives they sit in the squished auto exasperated and stunned. After such a bone crushing crash, however, a calloused conductor opens the window of his trolley and barks: "Hey! Get that thing out of the way!"

The harshness of the world of Laurel & Hardy is conveyed again in *Their First Mistake*. Stan has suggested a plan to Ollie that will make it easier for the boys to get a night out away from the wives. Or so the thinking goes. However, Mrs. Hardy has very different ideas about the matter. In fact, process server Billy Gilbert presents Ollie with her divorce papers. "Gee, that's tough," says Stan. "Your name Laurel?" asks Gilbert. "Yes, ma'am," Stan replies. "This is tougher," barks Gilbert. "She's suing *you* for the alienation of Mr.



Hardy's affections. And she's going to take you hook, line, and sinker!"

A standard symbol of the harshness of the Laurel & Hardy environment is the superbly antagonistic Jimmy Finlayson. His cocked eye and ever-widening glare clearly epitomizes the harsh treatment Stan and Ollie suffer at the hands of a cruel or just plain indifferent world. The masterful Finlayson double-take, likewise, characterizes the world's reaction of disbelief to the boys.

### The World as Irrational

Perhaps one reason the team has so much trouble is the fact their world is so *irrational*. In fact, it is as irrational as they are. How can they find stability in an unstable society? Even a casual glance at the world of Laurel & Hardy will reveal that it is inhabited by many, bigger fools than Stan and Ollie. In *Habeas Corpus* for instance, the boys answer an employment newspaper ad only to discover the job entails digging up corpses for a mad scientist's looney experiments. As the police carry him off to an asylum, Stan asks Ollie, "Don't you think the professor's a little bit crazy?" Ollie responds, "Why, he's as sound mentally as you and me!"

In *Hog Wild* Ollie's troubles become nearly neck breaking as Stan "helps" him put up a radio aerial "so Mrs. Hardy can get Japan." The unreasonableness of her whim is evident to anyone. That is, except Stan who smiles his approval and asks Ollie if he can help, saying that he'd like to get Japan too! Even before the boys get on the roof,

however, havoc is unleashed.

The nature of the nonrational Laurel & Hardy world becomes all too clear in *The Music Box*. The scene is simple. Piano movers Stan and Ollie are struggling a piano up an unreasonably long and narrow flight of stairs. Coming down the steps is the pompous consignee played by Billy Gilbert. The four meet: Gilbert, Hardy, Stan, and piano. Impasse! The exchange follows: "Well?" Gilbert asks impatiently. "Well, what?" pants Ollie. "Well, aren't you going to move it?" he asks. "Why don't you walk around?" suggests Stan. "What?" explodes Gilbert. "Walk around! Me, Professor Theodore Von Schwarzenhoffen, M.D., A.D., D.D.S., F.L.D., F.F.F. and F., should walk around?"<sup>8</sup> And with the Professor's wild gestures that threaten the boys with his cane, the encounter follows.

The Laurel & Hardy world abounds with such irrationality. Everyone Stan and Ollie encounter is irrational to some degree. Interestingly, the higher up a person is on the social-education ladder, the more wildly eccentric and unreasonable he is likely to be. The most typical examples include judges, scientists, professors, and doctors. It is noteworthy also that these "types" symbolize the essence of rationality in our society. If they embody madness, eccentricity, and irrationality one can well imagine the condition of the rest of the people in the Laurel & Hardy world. Their world is a picture of hostility and madness in which everyone looks after his own interests

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<sup>8</sup>Leonard Maltin, *Movie Comedy Teams* (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 36.

while being suspicious of all his fellows.

#### THE PRESENCE OF GRACE IN THE WORLD OF LAUREL & HARDY

The question arises as to how Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy can survive in such an angry, aggressive world as theirs. It would seem their inadequacies, incompetence, and characters would lead them quickly to a final crushing defeat. Surely, anyone as pretentious as Ollie, as slow as Stan, and as dumb as the pair of them could not last in such a violent and irrational environment.

But, almost strangely, Laurel & Hardy do survive amidst their disorderly society. The question of how this can happen has but one answer: *Grace*. Stan and Ollie live by grace, namely a given mercy which miraculously sustains them. Somehow the boys are compassionately relieved throughout their multitudinous sufferings. It is inexplicable; it is *miraculous*. There is no apparent logic that they should remain alive past the first day together. But, they do survive even against such horrible odds. Surely they do not merit such sustenance, such mercy. They embody most of the unreasonableness of their world. They participate in violence, anger, dishonesty, and lawlessness. They are capable of cheating and actually enjoy the world's madness when in their opinion they have gotten the best of it. Yet, in spite of this all, Stan and Ollie daringly ramble from misadventure to misadventure. Indeed, they *dare* to face their world with hope, bravery, and even anticipation that at long last they might receive their share of dignity and respect.

Misfortune it would seem is Laurel & Hardy's fate. If, in the road, there is a puddle, a nail, a banana peel, Ollie is sure to find it with at least one of his unfortunate feet. Likewise, if some untimely object is due to find its way to the ground chances are that Ollie's head will intercept the fall. If anything at all can run astray, or backfire, or misfire, or fall apart, or collapse at an inopportune moment, Stan or Ollie (or both) are likely to be there to receive, in full, the whole unfortunate effect. Needless to say, however, is that probably they themselves have inadvertently set into motion the forces of evil. Their clumsy, inattentive actions unleash a full measure of consequences. Stan and Ollie do indeed court disaster, naturally.

If misfortune is an active ingredient in the boys' experience, then one must also recognize an element of salvation, good fortune, grace. The most lucid example of this is seen in *Babes in Toyland*. Stanley Dum and Oliver Dee are residents of Toyland and apprentices to the Toymaker. They live there sharing the happy land with many contented and pleasant inhabitants, including Bo-Peep and her handsome sweetheart. But all is not tranquil, even in Toyland, for the evil Barnaby has plans to snatch the lovely maiden from the happy town and force her to marry him. In the meantime the business of toymaking goes on in not too normal fashion as Stanley Dum and Oliver Dee contribute their infamous assistance. Stanley confuses an order from Santa Claus and instead of making 600 one-foot high wooden soldiers they make 100 six-foot high ones. When the feared Bogeyman of Barnaby

attack Toyland to steal Bo-Peep, the two toymakers employ their giant-sized soldiers into combat against Barnaby's forces and defeat the invaders. The toy order mix-up has become a *blessing*. Mishap has become grace. Thus, the powers of evil are defeated. Stanley Dum and Oliver Dee have saved the day.

Another image of grace occurs in *Fra Diavolo*. Stanilo and Olivero are poor wanderers when they decide to become highwaymen. Their first hold-up victim, however, turns out to be none other than the infamous bandit himself, "Fra Diavolo" (The Devil's Brother). The outlaw first orders Stanilo and Olivero to hang each other for their mischievous attempt. But their incompetence and friendship are so overwhelming the bandit takes pity, relents, and assigns them as his servants. Once again the boys' failure turns to good!

### The Dance

In the standard Laurel & Hardy format there are two gestures conveying *grace*. Both occur in the middle of destruction or simply emerge during the eventful lives of Stan and Ollie. The first of these is the gesture of *dance*. It occurs in *The Music Box*, *Way Out West*, *Flying Deuces*, and *Pardon Us*. The dance scenes are very natural, arising out of the action itself. Never do they intrude or seem artificially imposed. Dance is a natural Laurel & Hardy expression. It is part of their natures and rising seemingly from the soul it wells forth and, surfacing, finds form during Stan and Ollie's everyday experience. There is dancing because in Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy

there is music.

Perhaps the best example of dance in Laurel & Hardy appears in *The Music Box*. As will be recalled the plot consists of the Laurel & Hardy Cartage Co. delivering a piano that has been ordered by the wife of a German-type professor who "hates and despises" pianos. It has been ordered "to surprise him on his birthday." After a full day's labor and suffering insults, detainments, and assorted set-backs the two finally manage to get the piano in the house while both the professor and his wife are gone. At last the piano is uncrated and while the boys proceed to clean up their considerable mess, Ollie flips the switch and the player piano belts out a lively rendition of "Turkey in the Straw." Relaxed and feeling good that their day's mission is nearly accomplished their clean up campaign slowly turns into a wonderfully happy duet as Stan and Ollie translate their joy into a mountain-type jig.

### The Laugh

The second gesture of *grace* in the Laurel & Hardy films is their *laughing* routine. Duplicating the dance, laughing seems to spring up and gush in the lives of Stan and Ollie. It likewise emerges in the midst of assorted occasions and predicaments. In *Leave 'Em Laughing*, the boys accidentally get an overdose of "laughing" gas while in the dentist's office. In *Fra Diavolo* they are helplessly drunk and engage in revelous laughter. In *Way Out West* Stan is pursued by a gold-digging floozie who mercilessly tickles him to the point of

hysterical laughter. In *Scram* the boys are unaware that a water pitcher contains gin. They proceed to drink themselves into hilarity with the delicious "water" and take the wife of the town judge with them as they courteously share their refreshment with her. The following scene is a tremendously funny laughing routine as the three of them lay across her bed in uncontrolled revelry. At the height of their laughter her husband walks into the room, with murder in his eyes he stares at the three merry-makers, followed by a Hardy tie twiddle and a fade out chase into the night.

The laughing routine in *Fra Diavolo* is masterful. Stan and Ollie are drawing from a huge cask in the wine cellar. This procedure leads to the famous sequence, described here by William Everson.

Hopelessly drunk from sampling all the wares in the wine cellar, they collapse in helpless laughter. Everything that happens, including their own arrest and threatened execution, merely spurs an even greater laugh reaction. From giggles to chuckles and then to belly laughs, the sequence builds, grows and feeds on itself, relying not on incident but only on the infectious quality of laughter itself.<sup>9</sup>

### The Laurel & Hardy Friendship

As important as the dance and the laugh are in showing grace in the world of Laurel & Hardy, there is a larger view revealing mercy and affirmation: the Stan-Ollie *relationship*. This relationship is the life source of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. One gets the clear impression that either one without the other would perish. The

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<sup>9</sup>Everson, p. 142.

relationship is the source of their strength, their hope, their joy. It is as though Ollie's help, patience, and understanding is the single source of Stan's survival. Likewise, Stan's blind, blanket acceptance of Ollie gives him the one thing he needs to continue living; namely, to be important to someone, to be needed, to be necessary. The Stan-Ollie relationship represents more than the sum total of its participants. It is something larger, something deeper. Separate, they are ineffectual. Together, although incompetent for the most part, in rare but meaningful moments of solidarity, they can vanquish any foe. A beautiful example of this occurs in *Big Business* as Stan empties the belligerent Finlayson's home of vases and other glassware by pitching them out of a broken window to the awaiting Ollie, who, with shovel in hand, smashes them to bits in frantic but devastating batting form. Two points are noteworthy relative to this scene. First, even the boys' battles become game-like when left unfettered (they really are children at heart). Secondly, when they are united in a single purpose they can be victorious.

#### INTERPRETATION

##### Here's Another Fine Mess You've Gotten Me Into!

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Gen. 6:5-6



1) Like the word of Laurel & Hardy our world too is full of *violence*. Theologically as man has further become separated from creation and from God his violence has spread to global proportions. No longer is it simply a story of two brothers fighting in a distant field as with Cain & Abel. Nor is it a private conflict between Stan and Ollie. Rather violence has direction, momentum, and a reciprocal nature. In our nuclear age of megaweapons reciprocal violence is terribly "civilized" just as it is portrayed in the world of Laurel & Hardy. It is schemed, planned, deliberate, calculated escalation. It is terribly "rational" as one gambit leads to an even deadlier retaliation. Although such violence is "orderly" it becomes out of control, likewise, just like what happens in the world of Laurel & Hardy. In this sense it is *demoniac* in character. It seizes hold of man's relationships and turns them into exchanges of overt or subtle aggression. And consequently it has global dimensions: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, And the earth was filled with Violence."<sup>11</sup>

Theologically the reason for the condition for man's violence is his act of self removal from the center of life. He has been banished by God as a stranger and sojourner because of man's refusal to live in harmony, to accept his position in creation. In a word, he is a troublemaker. No longer is the world a place of *shalom* for him, but instead he lives in danger. These dangers are real and imagined. The result is fear and anxiety. Stan Laurel's cry is a

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<sup>11</sup>Gen. 6:11.

symbol of this. He senses life to be very dangerous. Man is no longer at home with himself or his world. He is *isolated*. This is symbolized in the words of Oliver Hardy, *I have nothing to say!* Not only does man have nothing to say to his neighbor, he chooses not to speak a kind and loving word. He chooses not to attempt a peaceful word. He has no comfort to bring, no peace to speak of his own. He is too much concerned with his own preservation, his own happiness, his own assertion.

2) This violence has even permeated man's most intimate relationships, namely the *family*. The problems in the Oliver Hardy household are symbolic of the breakdown of human relationships at the primary level. Domination, suspicion, deception, and the absence of affection has degenerated the family into a pleasure seeking environment existing only for self-gratification. It has lost the sense of permanence, commitment, and sacrifice. Once thought to be sacred and necessary for the well-being of the entire tribe, the family is now a manifestation of promiscuity and self-indulgence. It is often tenuous, unfulfilling, and can become a source of contempt.

Much of the domestic disharmony in the world of Laurel & Hardy is the result of dehumanized personal relations. Mrs. Hardy, for example, calls Ollie, "that big fat billiken of mine." She shouts and demeans her husband with many dehumanizing names and other insults. Likewise, Ollie is dishonest with her, while trying to cheat and be deceptive.

3) This condition of man is *irrational*, and just like the world

of Laurel & Hardy it is chaotic. It is difficult for man to make sense out of his experience because his own actions are so unreasonable and detached. He cannot be rational because he cannot live for others. In this sense, he has "nothing to say." This is true because man is so irrational, so limited. He has very little to say. He has much to say for himself, but very little for his neighbor. He has a great deal to say *against* his neighbor, but not much *for* him.

4) Industrialization is an extreme expression of man's *isolation*. It is a source of Stan and Ollie's dehumanization as they struggle to find meaning and fulfillment in factories and workshops. They attempt to perform "functions" or "tasks" which ultimately cause their frustration and depersonalization. In fact, in the world of Laurel & Hardy, machines and tools become conveyances of violence and ill-treatment. They are not seen as wonderful expediences, but rather instruments of destruction through which man becomes separated from himself and from his fellow.

5) Stan and Ollie make a sham of the "American Dream." Clearly their business ventures are for naught: *Swiss Miss*, *Towed in a Hole*, *Big Business*, *Tit for Tat*. Ultimately all of their financial striving is worthless. The American Dream of wealth and instant success is purely mythical. In the world of Laurel & Hardy it is illusionary and very elusive. The "self-made" man model is meaningless. The Harold Lloyd All-American Boy type, always striving, always winning is alien to the films of Laurel & Hardy. The Harold Lloyd type is in the

end without character. Although Stan and Ollie expend much energy in their chase after the American Myth, in the end the American Dream evades them as their plans come crashing down around their ears. The American "go-getter" is a hollow man. Stan and Ollie, on the other hand, surrounded by failure, have character.

Actually there is fortune in Stan and Ollie's misfortune. The fact they never catch the American Dream is a blessing in disguise. It is obvious in their films that social prestige, success, and materialism only compounds the difficulty of being human in a problematic society. The homeowner, the professor, the business man, and those representing the law all suffer from a dehumanized existence.

6) *Social injustice* is commonplace in Stan and Ollie's world. Primarily it assumes subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination against those who cannot "follow the army curriculum." When Stan and Ollie naively take the camp trash to the General while explicitly carrying out an "order" of the camp cook they are thrown in the guard house (*Pack up Your Troubles*). When Stan tries to take an advance order for next year's Christmas tree, the customer immediately chops the tree in half (*Big Business*). In *Swiss Miss*, the boys are mouse-trap salesmen in Switzerland (where else can you find more cheese, and mice!) and proceed to sell all their wares to a single customer who pays them in non-negotiable currency. To celebrate the big sale Stan and Ollie order and enjoy a full course meal, ordering the best that the chef has to offer. When the proprietor will not accept the bogus money as payment the boys are forced to labor in the kitchen, an extra

day for every broken dish, of which there are *many*. Their trouble is compounded because of their previous insults directed to the chef during their lavish feast.

Primarily the social injustice experienced in the world of Laurel & Hardy is nothing less than dehumanization. It occurs mostly in the insidious little cruelties and dishonesties that are so much a part of human nature. A prime example is in *Come Clean*. The Hardys are at home and in a most unusual state of tranquility and romance. All is well in the Hardy home, for a change. Ollie gestures his delight and, anticipating an unusually pleasant day with Mrs. Hardy, assures her they can be alone the whole day, "with nothing to mar our joy." On cue the doorebell rings, thus ending the all-too-temporary bliss: it is the Laurels! With that, Mrs. Hardy quickly reverts back to her normal shrewish self. Reluctant to give up such an occasioned day, Ollie says, "We'll pretend we're not in!" Of course he inadvertently reveals this plan to the Laurels and things go their customary way. It is such deception and basic dishonesty that contribute to the breakdown of relationships and the degradation of the individual, both in Stan and Ollie's experience and in the world in which we live.

7) Man has attempted to solve his personal and social conditions through *legalism*. He has attempted to legislate morality and equality. "Law" has become the basis of restrictions and sanctions of behavior. Social groups have tried to control man externally and superficially by means of fantastic, complex systems of codes. This has been an effort to do on the outside what man by himself cannot do

on the inside. This Law became legalism through which injustice and depersonalization has become rampant. Legalism has to do with trivial questions of conduct rather than people. It renders laws more important than individuals. Often it does this in such a way that some people are benefited while others suffer. In fact the law is often a hindrance to justice.

Fundamentally, the law is a minimum requirement. It is an empty criteria of ethical or human behavior. One can certainly live "lawfully" and still be a dehumanizing force in society. Stan and Ollie are "law-abiding" citizens in the same sense that applies to most of us. Likewise, their adherence to the law is superficial. They have trouble with authority in a world that lives according to Law. In this sense ethical or humanizing values are not internalized. They have no spiritual base. Rather, people's behavior is determined by the presence of authority or by retaliatory threat. Laurel & Hardy have disregard for law on the one hand and yet in other ways they sometimes respond to a "higher righteousness." A case in point occurs in *Laughing Gravy* when the boys rescue a dog from freezing by breaking a "law" forbidding pets to be in their boarding room. A humane action necessitated suspending a law with a code having a higher value.

Stan and Ollie suffer at the hands of legalistic attitudes. They are often rejected and shunned solely on the basis of "legal" judgments of acceptability. This "law" includes the entire complex of restrictions and condonences of society. They hold some people in suppression while supporting the interests of others. Many persons

cannot conform to these standards while others simply are not allowed to. Some do not "measure up"; some do not "fit in." Stan Laurel & Oliver Hardy are excluded by most every criterion.

This whole question of *cultic* treatment of people is a theological issue. Stan and Ollie are rejected by the Cult. They are *outcasts*. They are considered to be "unclean" by their cultic group, namely society. They are vagabonds, vagrants, no-accounts. They have no "standing" in the Cult. Consequently, they are rejected. This type of legalism is decisively abolished by the Christian Gospel. Jesus of Nazareth rejected legalistic treatment of persons. One gets the impression that Stan and Ollie, as outcasts, are to be included in the table fellowship.

8) In fact, Laurel & Hardy are distinctively *blessed* and are sustained by this blessing. Their salvation is their friendship. This is their grace: the sustaining, unmerited affirmation of Stan and Ollie. Both survive, but only by means of their ongoing relationship. This friendship is their gift. It finds two major symbols that are expressive gestures: the dance, and their wonderful laughter. The affirmation of their friendship erupts through this laughter and dancing. They are signs of new life, rebirth, and if you wish, resurrection. They are images of New Being as Stan and Ollie put aside differences and forget about one another's failings and simply dance, sing, and laugh. These things arise out of the midst of seeming defeat and utter chaos. When the Laurel & Hardy world can be in shambles all around them, like love itself affirmation emerges.

9) The dance is an ancient gesture, one in which form and meaning are achieved through ritual, art, and religion. Dance is a religious encounter in which life is re-enacted. It is a process of "getting back to order." Dance is a way of relating the participant and the witness to creation. It symbolizes the tensions, anxieties, and rhythms of life. Dance is the union of spirit and body in the celebration of life. It is joy and contentment, sorrow and pain. The dance symbolizes the tension between pleasure and pain.

Consequently, when Stan and Ollie dance, the gesture is rich in these many meanings. It is clearly a spiritual conveyance and a victory. The Stan-Ollie dance and song is a beautiful moment of affirmation. It is their brief gesture that together they can celebrate life *together*. Likewise, it is an affirmation of one another. The dances represent a union between the two characters. They are a blending or balancing of the two personalities. Plus the dance is a mixture of individual and "group" expression. Although the dance is but a fleeting moment in the lives of Laurel & Hardy, nonetheless it is revealing of their characters, their friendship, and their attitude toward the world.

The Laurel & Hardy dancing is an unconditional celebration of life. It is a gesture of hope, love, and faith. The dance implies an attitude of ultimate trust and works life a symbolic disregard for the cares and demoniac devices of society. Through it, Stan and Ollie so much as say, life is good come what may! In spite of ill-treatment; in spite of trials and tribulations; in spite of failure



and poverty, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy can say "yes!" to life, and to each other--*dancing*.

10) Stan and Ollie's laughter is deeply theological. Like the dance, laughter is very much a religious gesture. Laughter is a sense of "relief," the feeling of "a sudden glory," the sensation of "well being," high spirits, contentment, joy, and happiness. Henri Bergson's *Elan Vital* also expresses the essence of laughter. And so when Stan and Ollie are elevated to such heights of laughter in their films they are sharing in a *religious* experience.

The subject of laughter raises an essential theological question: What does it mean to laugh? Specifically, from our vantage point, what does it mean to laugh at Laurel & Hardy? First, the opposite of laughter is not sobriety or seriousness, but indifference. Laughter is a primary way man encounters his environment. "Laughing off" something is not really nonreaction at all. Granted, it implies an acquiescent response but it does constitute a response nonetheless. Laughter is responsive. For one to laugh, one must recognize, acknowledge, and affirm or deny one's fellow and/or one's environment. Laughter is a means of sharing; it is a participation. When one laughs, one accepts partially or wholly the state of one's situation. This is not to say that by laughing, one simply submits to his entire life situation. But it does mean that he acknowledges it as being real, and that he is not alone in his condition.

Theologically, laughter means to identify, to affirm one's connection to creation. In our relatedness through laughter we

recognize our part in history. We understand ourselves to be a part of the ultimate inconsistencies inherent in our shared human experience. This also implies that since I acknowledge my common existence, I must also be aware that responsibility is a part of this mutuality. And so to laugh at Stan and Ollie is to acknowledge their predicament and to sense responsibility for it. I know about their predicament because I have first experienced it. I have been born into it. It is our common heritage. I say "yes" to it in the sense that I understand the universality of incongruity. On the other hand, however, laughter can be a means of separation and illusion. Somehow we believe that we are not nearly so vain as Ollie, nor as slow and witless as Stan. And so we laugh *at* them in our false superiority, and hide behind our laughter. This is when laughter is a lie; when it is false laughter. This is when laughter really ceases.

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## FILMS

<i>Babes in Toyland</i>	1934	Hal Roach	M-G-M	9 Reels
<i>The Battle of the Century</i>	1927	"	"	2 Reels
<i>Big Business</i>	1929	"	"	"
<i>Blockheads</i>	1938	Stan Laurel Prod.		5 Reels
<i>Brats</i>	1930	Hal Roach	M-G-M	"
<i>The Bullfighters</i>	1945	20th Century Fox		7 Reels
<i>Busy Bodies</i>	1933	Hal Roach	M-G-M	2 Reels
<i>Come Clean</i>	1931	"	"	"
<i>Dirty Work</i>	1933	"	"	"
<i>Do Detectives Think?</i>	1927	"	Pathe	"
<i>Double Whoopee</i>	1929	"	M-G-M	"
<i>The Finishing Touch</i>	1928	"	"	"

<i>The Flying Deuces</i>	1939	RKO Radio		7 Reels
<i>Flying Elephants</i>	1927	Hal Roach	Pathe	2 Reels
<i>Fra Diavolo</i>	1933	"	M-G-M	9 Reels
<i>Going Bye Bye</i>	1934	"	"	2 Reels
<i>Habeas Corpus</i>	1928	"	"	"
<i>Helpmates</i>	1931	"	"	"
<i>Hog Wild</i>	1930	"	"	"
<i>Laughing Gravy</i>	1931	"	"	"
<i>Leave 'Em Laughing</i>	1928	"	"	"
<i>Liberty</i>	1929	"	"	"
<i>Me and My Pal</i>	1933	"	"	"
<i>Men O' War</i>	1929	"	"	"
<i>The Music Box</i>	1932	"	"	3 Reels
<i>Pack up Your Troubles</i>	1932	"	"	7 Reels
<i>The Paper Hanger's Helper</i>	1925	Lubin (Hardy only)		unknown
<i>Pardon Us</i>	1931	Hal Roach	M-G-M	6 Reels
<i>A Perfect Day</i>	1929	"	"	2 Reels
<i>Saps at Sea</i>	1940	"	United Artists	5 Reels
<i>Scram</i>	1932	Hal Roach	M-G-M	2 Reels
<i>The Second Hundred Years</i>	1927	"	"	"
<i>Should Married Men Go Home?</i>	1928	"	"	"
<i>Slipping Wives</i>	1927	"	Pathe	"
<i>Sons of the Desert</i>	1934	"	M-G-M	7 Reels
<i>Swiss Miss</i>	1938	"	"	"
<i>That's My Wife</i>	1929	"	"	2 Reels

<i>Their First Mistake</i>	1932	Hal Roach	M-G-M	2 Reels
<i>Them Thar Hills</i>	1934	"	"	"
<i>They Go Boom</i>	1929	"	"	"
<i>Thicker Than Water</i>	1935	"	"	"
<i>Tit for Tat</i>	1935	"	"	"
<i>Towed in a Hole</i>	1933	"	"	"
<i>Twice Two</i>	1933	"	"	"
<i>Two Tars</i>	1928	"	"	"
<i>Way Out West</i>	1937	Stan Laurel Prod.		6 Reels
<i>Why Girls Love Sailors</i>	1927	Hal Roach	Pathe	2 Reels
<i>Wrong Again</i>	1929	"	M-G-M	"
<i>You're Darn Tootin</i>	1928	"	"	"

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KARI RENE HALL / Los Angeles Times

Lucille Hardy Price, left, Oliver Hardy's widow, and Lois Laurel Hawes, Stan Laurel's daughter, propose toast to the memory of Laurel and Hardy comedy team at Sons of Desert fan club meeting.

# Oasis for Sons of the Desert

## Laurel and Hardy Fans? They Certainly Are!

By DENNIS McLELLAN, *Times Staff Writer*

For a moment it looked as if it might turn into a scene from a vintage Laurel and Hardy two-reeler.

The occasion was the annual banquet of Orange County's "Unaccustomed as We Are" tent of the Sons of the Desert, the international Laurel and Hardy fan club, at the Balboa pavilion in Newport Beach.

Four club members, wearing red fezzes emblazoned with the gold Sons of the Desert insignia, were taking turns toasting the special guests for the evening, when the microphone stand ingloriously slipped down in mid-toast.

### Dignity at All Costs

As the young men jokingly fumbled with the errant microphone it seemed altogether in keeping with Stan Laurel's dictum that the Sons of the Desert maintain a loose dignity.

Indeed, the club's official constitution proclaims: "We shall strive to maintain that kind of dignity at all costs—at all times."

They came, 80 Laurel and Hardy fans in all, from as far away as Camarillo and San Diego for the Orange County bash, the annual high-

light of any Sons of the Desert tent.

Each tent, or chapter, takes its name from the title of a Laurel and Hardy movie, as dictated in the constitution written by biographer John McCabe ("Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy") who co-founded the Sons of the Desert in New York in 1965.

"The Unaccustomed as We Are" tent, one of 60 chapters now spread from Los Angeles to Norway, was formed in 1971 by a Fountain Valley high school student. Its ranks number 70 members, ranging in age from 5 to 75.

"The banquet is sort of a culmination of the year," said Brent Walker, the tent's grand sheik, who is followed in the club's hierarchy by the vice sheik; sheik in charge of vice, of course.

"It's mainly a celebration to get all the members together in a more prestigious atmosphere," explained Walker, a 19-year-old Cal State Fullerton communications major who says he has always been a Laurel and Hardy fan.

"It's great to get together with other people who enjoy them and to meet people who worked with them."

Thursday evening's agenda in-

cluded the customary toasts and the singing of the Sons of the Desert song, a Laurel and Hardy slide presentation narrated by tent member Randy Skretvedt and the screening of rare film clips.

To help guests get in the spirit of the evening, Sons of the Desert fezzes, patterned after the ones worn by Laurel and Hardy in the 1934 movie, were sold at the door for \$4.

### Special Guests

Like "the Way Out West" tent of the San Fernando Valley, the Orange County group's close proximity to Hollywood enables the club to invite former Laurel and Hardy co-workers to speak at meetings held eight times a year at Mercury Savings in Huntington Beach.

But the banquet, in particular, allows club members to gain firsthand knowledge of what "the boys" were really like.

This year the special guests included Lucille Hardy Price, who was married to Oliver 17 years; Lois Laurel Hawes, Stan's daughter; Anita Garvin Stanley, frequent Laurel and Hardy co-star; Roy Sear-

Please see F. S. Page 2

# FANS: Oasis for Sons of the Desert

## Continued from First Page

wright, special effects wizard at Hal Roach Studios; film editor Dick Currier, and Venice Lloyd, widow of cameraman Art Lloyd.

But it seemed the most popular guest was a small, dapperly dressed white-haired gentleman who spent most of the evening playing the upright piano in the center of the banquet room.

T. Marvin Hatley, who wrote the music for the Laurel and Hardy comedies, is unknown to most moviegoers. Among the Sons of the Desert, however, he's a legend.

Hatley composed the catchy little ditty that became probably the most instantly recognizable tune in film history: Laurel and Hardy's theme music, the Kuku song.

### Tune Draws Devotees

"The top voice represents Babe Hardy, the dominant one—it sounds like an Army bugle call," Hatley said, demonstrating the sound on the piano. "Little Stanley's not very bright, he's only got two tones. It sounds like a cuckoo call. So when you put the two characters together it sounds like this."

The familiar tune filled the hall and, like a magnet club members' attention shifted to Hatley, who smiled faintly as he played the 50-year-old tune.

When Hatley sat down to write the song, he said he had no idea he was creating a piece of movie history.

"It's just a piece of music like anything else," he said. "I was just fooling around. I didn't think it would amount to anything. When I was working for Laurel and Hardy I was just a flunky doing whatever they wanted, trying to make a living."

At 76, Hatley is as much a fan of Laurel and Hardy as he was when he went to work at Hal Roach Studios at age 22. "I still laugh at them like I did when I was a young man. There's just something funny about them. I don't know what it is."

He's also a member of the "Way Out West" tent, whose meetings are always enlivened by Hatley's piano playing. It's something he looks forward to.

"They're always such a happy group of folks," he said. "There's such little happiness in the world today I'm always happy to be there."

That sentiment was echoed by other club members.

David Koenig, a 19-year-old Costa Mesa resident, said he joined the Orange County tent five years ago, "because I like Laurel and Hardy and it looked like a place to have fun. Fun people just seem to come to the meetings."

Terry Moran, a 57-year-old radiologist from Newport Beach, is thinking of joining the fun. He had never heard of the Sons of the Desert until he read an announcement in the paper about the banquet.

### No Stranger to L & H

He's no stranger to Laurel and Hardy, however.

"Ever since I was a kid I thought they were the greatest," he said. "In fact, I laughed so hard nobody would sit next to me at the movies."

Too many of today's movies, he observed, leave the audience feeling tense at the fade-out. "You come out of a Laurel and Hardy movie and you feel like you had a couple of martinis—you're relaxed."

Rick Greene, 23, founded the "Big Business" tent in Cleveland in 1973 when he was 15. When he moved to San Diego in 1978 he joined the "Saps at Sea" tent and now that he lives in Sepulveda he's a member of the "Way Out West" tent.

Greene, who edits the intratent journal, has obviously given some thought as to why Laurel and Hardy still generate laughs more than a half century after their debut.

"Not only are they funnier than everyone else, but since there are two of them they are twice as funny as everyone else," he said. "Their characters are so loveable you find yourself caught up in their charm and you can't help but love them back. And while Chaplin and Keaton are classic funny comedians you don't love them like Stan and Ollie."

Greene noted that people from all walks of life "are drawn to the club for the simple reason they love Laurel and Hardy. There's something very special about that."

Although most Sons of the Desert members simply enjoy watching the old movies, Greene said, "each club usually has three or four diehard fanatics who collect films, posters and everything, and I'm one of them."

"I have 70 of their films and about 300 8x10s," he said.

"My god," gasped the woman across the banquet table.

"And you thought *he* was nuts," the woman next to her said, gesturing to her companion's husband.

### 'Two Minds Without a Single Thought'

That sort of dedication does not go unnoticed or unappreciated by Stan Laurel's daughter, Lois Laurel Hawes, who belongs to the "Helpmates" tent in London and who frequently visits "Way Out West" meetings when she's in Los Angeles.

Hawes, in fact, first met her husband Tony, a comedy scriptwriter for the BBC, after seeing him throw a pie at his friend during the 1980 "Sons of the Desert" convention in Hollywood.

Hawes said that a year before her father died in 1965, he was sent a copy of the club's constitution. He was delighted with the idea for the club, and one of his suggestions was that the club's whimsical motto be "Two Minds Without a Single Thought."

"At that time he never dreamed it would mushroom into this big an organization," she said. "I think the boys both would be overwhelmed and I think it would please him (Laurel) that it attracts such a caring generation of fans."

"Never in his wildest dreams did he (Oliver) imagine this would happen," agreed Lucille Hardy Price. "It's so satisfying to see the dedication of the fans and the way they keep their memory alive."

She said she and her husband, Ben, must turn down many of the requests they receive to speak at tent meetings around the country. Still, since January they have visited tents in both San Diego and Tucson, and now Orange County.

"Thank you for being such wonderful admirers of Stan and Babe's work," she told the "Unaccustomed as We Are" tent members. "This would make them so very happy—this is what they worked for."

# Laurel and Hardy movies unearthed

HOLLYWOOD (AP) — A four-year search that took researchers from the Yukon to Yugoslavia has reassembled nearly 100 "lost" films of Laurel and Hardy, including several never seen before in the United States, studio officials say.

Some of the films starring comedians Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy were found perfectly preserved in a locker under a skating rink in the Yukon or in vaults at MGM Studios, while others were found in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, said a spokeswoman for Hal Roach Studios, where the 98 or 99 shorts and features were produced from 1927 until Oliver Hardy's death in 1957.

"They found three or four films that never had been seen by the American public," said the Roach spokeswoman, who asked not to be named.

The films' rediscovery was announced at a news conference Wednesday at Hal Roach Studios by studio chairman Earl Glick and vice president Herb Gelbspan. Mayor Tom Bradley proclaimed the week Laurel and Hardy Week in Los Angeles. Telegrams were read from celebrities including Bob Hope and Jackie Gleason.

Hope hailed the sad-faced Laurel and his plump, long-suffering sidekick Hardy as "the greatest comedy team to perform before the cameras."

The film search began four years ago when Gelbspan discovered that nearly half the now-classic productions had been lost. All but one of the films were relocated, he said.

Some of the films were made in French, Italian and Spanish, and Laurel and Hardy's own voices, while others had been dubbed into German, Gelbspan said.

Laurel and Hardy films now appear regularly on television, but Gelbspan said this was the first time in 40 years that the entire canon had been together under one roof.

The newly rediscovered films — both sound and silent — will be converted to safety film from their original, highly flammable nitrate film stock. Orchestral or organ accompaniment is planned in theaters playing the silents, Gelbspan said.

Theatrical distribution of the films will be initiated at a Los Angeles Laurel and Hardy celebrity benefit and festival scheduled for early 1983. Other festivals are to follow nationwide, Gelbspan said.

*Progress Bulletin 12/10/82*